

REFLECTIONS ON CALVIN'S CATECHETICS

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On April 28, 1564, a dying John Calvin summoned the pastors of Geneva to his bedside, and in a farewell address reflected on the course of his work in their city. Among his words to them were these:

Upon my return from Strasbourg, I wrote the catechism hastily, for I would never have accepted this ministry if they had not pledged me these two things: namely, to keep the catechism and the discipline.¹

The catechism and the discipline. The centrality of these two works in Calvin's dying reflections stand as an indication both of their signal importance to his labors in Geneva, and of their inseparability one from another.

Our task in this paper will be to get some sense of the way in which Calvin's catechetics fit into the broader context of the polity, theology and worship of Reformed Geneva. We shall maintain that catechesis stands, for Calvin, as the mirror and embodiment of an all-encompassing vision of Christian life, and to separate it from that totality, either in its theological or its practical aspects, is to fail to grasp its significance.

The first part of this essay will be a brief survey of various aspects of Calvin's educational practice. In a second section we will broaden our sights a bit and look at Calvin's catechism in the light of some of its Lutheran and Roman Catholic counterparts.

I.

Though our primary focus will be on the period following Calvin's return to Geneva in 1541, three documents from his early stay in the city (1536-1538) are worth citing in connection with our discussion. They are: the *Genevan Confession*, the *1537 Articles*, and the *Instruction in Faith*.

When Calvin first arrived in Geneva in the summer of 1536, he found a city whose inhabitants had pledged themselves a few months earlier "to live henceforth according to the Law of the Gospel and the Word of God, and to abolish all Papal abuses."² The development of a new social and religious regime to replace the old order, however, was embryonic at best. Looking back on this period, Calvin recalls,

When I first arrived in this church there was almost nothing. They were preaching and that's all. They were good at seeking out idols and burning them, but there was no Reformation. Everything was in turmoil.³

Calvin and Farel set to work quickly to bring order out of the chaos.

One of the first steps which they proposed was designed to ensure the genuine commitment of all the citizens to the task of reform. Toward this end Calvin and Farel⁴ presented to the magistrates, in November, 1536, a short confessional document entitled, "Confession of Faith which all the citizens and inhabitants of Geneva and the subjects of the country must promise to keep and hold."⁵ The title in this case says it all. The document (which has since come to be called the *Genevan Confession*) is a short survey, in twenty-one articles, of certain essentials of the evangelical faith. Calvin regarded it as a straightforward summary of the message of Scripture,

and thought that subscription to it should be a condition of citizenship. The magistrates eventually received the document, but gave up on implementing the subscription requirements in the face of popular resistance.⁶

A second document, the *Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva*⁷, proposes four measures designed to ensure that the Lord's Supper "is always being celebrated and frequented, and this under such good supervision that no one dare presume to present himself unless devoutly, and with genuine reverence for it."⁸ In order to safeguard the integrity of the Sacrament, the document asks (1) that discipline be established under the supervision of a council of elders and ministers, who together would maintain oversight of the life and government of all quarters of the city. This council would administer fraternal admonition toward the wayward and would possess the power of excommunication for stubborn offenders. The *Articles* also propose (2) that psalm singing be established in the churches "so that the hearts of all be roused and incited to make like prayers and render like praises and thanks to God with one accord"; (3) that the city's marriage laws be reformed in order to stay a series of scandals and controversies arising out of the old papal regime; and most importantly for our purposes, (4) that provision be made for young children to be so instructed "that they are able to give reason for the faith, so that evangelical doctrine is not left to decay, and also that its substance be diligently maintained and transmitted from hand to hand and from father to son."

As an aid to this program of instruction, the *Articles* suggest,

...that there a brief and simple summary of the Christian faith, to be taught to all children, and that at certain seasons of the year they come before the ministers to be interrogated and examined, and to receive more ample explanation, according as there is need to the capacity of each one of them, until they have been proved sufficiently instructed.⁹

Magistrates are urged to see that parents exercise "pains and diligence" in seeing that their children receive proper instruction.

The 1537 *Articles* met with a rocky reception, and were eventually superseded by the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541. It is worth noting, however, that catechetical instruction and church discipline appear together from the very beginning as individual components in a unified program to establish and safeguard the integrity of the Lord's Table in the city of Geneva.

The "brief and simple summary" of Christian faith for which the *Articles* called was not long in coming. By mid-January of 1537, Calvin had published the French edition of his *Instruction in Faith*¹⁰, and a Latin edition appeared the following year.¹¹ The *Instruction* reads like nothing so much as a condensation of the 1536 *Institutes*. It follows the latter in adopting the general outline of Luther's *Small Catechism*, beginning with a consideration of the human condition in the light of God's Law, and proceeding from there to an exposition of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments. It concludes with brief sections on church order and the civil magistrate.

The *Instruction in Faith* by all evidence enjoyed only very limited success as an educational tool. Its articles tend to be rather long and unwieldy, and there is no question-and-answer format to prompt the student, making memorization difficult. By the time Calvin writes the preface to his 1545 Latin Catechism he is expressing concern that the *Instruction* would be lost to sight altogether.¹² Whatever hope for success the *Instruction* might have had was cut short rather abruptly when Calvin and Farel were expelled from Geneva in the year following its publication.

Calvin's exile in Strasbourg brought him in touch with some of the finest educational minds in Europe, and gave him the opportunity to witness firsthand a city which had already implemented a thriving Reformed discipline and pedagogy. Calvin there became close friends with

Jean Sturm, a Paris-trained humanist and educational specialist who had been called to the city one year earlier as rector of the newly-opened Strasbourg Academy. Under the guidance of Martin Bucer, Calvin became a lecturer in the Academy and pastor of the French refugee congregation, where he gained valuable practical experience in matters of education and discipline. The congregation was somewhat less than five hundred members, and Calvin experimented with a system in which each member would have a personal interview with the pastor before Communion, so that the troubled in conscience might be reassured and the ill-informed or ignorant could be instructed.¹³

In September of 1541 Calvin reluctantly returned to his work in Geneva after receiving assurances about the Genevans' commitment to his program of reform. Twenty days after his arrival he submitted for the Magistrates' approval the 1541 *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, a revised and expanded plan for the organization and discipline of the church.¹⁴ Within two months they had been fully approved by the General Council.

The *Ordinances* set forth Calvin's famous polity of pastors, doctors, elders and deacons, and they make explicit provisions for the education of the city. First, a rigorous program of preaching is instituted in the city churches, with each parish holding two services every Sunday, and three more during the week.¹⁵ Catechetical instruction for children is to be scheduled for Sunday noon in each parish. And a call is issued for a "definite formulary" to be composed which could serve as the basis for catechetical instruction.

We get some idea of the program Calvin had in mind from an early passage in his 1536 *Institutes*:

The best method of catechizing would be to have a manual drafted for this exercise, containing and summarizing in a simple manner nearly all the articles of our religion, on which the whole believers' church ought to agree without controversy. A child of ten [!!] would present himself to the church to declare his confession of faith, would be examined in each article, and answer to each; if he were ignorant of anything or insufficiently understood it, he would be taught. Thus, while the church looks on as witness, he would profess the one true and sincere faith, in which the believing folk with one mind worship the one God. If this discipline were in effect today, it would certainly arouse some slothful parents, who carelessly neglect the instruction of their children as a matter of no concern to them; for then they could not overlook it without public disgrace.¹⁶

It is interesting to note here that Calvin has considerably more in mind than a simple rote knowledge of the catechism. Children are to be instructed and examined for a proper understanding of the material. As in the 1537 *Articles*, we find explicit links being made between catechetical instruction and the Lord's Supper, with instruction designed to prepare students for a public confession of faith and admission to the sacrament. Calvin also follows Luther in enlisting the active support of families in the educational enterprise. One of the purposes of the weekly recitations at church is to goad parents into taking seriously the task of educating their children in the faith.

As in the 1537 *Articles*, the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* also provide for a formal discipline to oversee the educational enterprise. A Consistory of lay elders and ministers is to keep a watchful eye that parents are fulfilling their duties properly. Those who are slack are to be admonished, and stubborn offenders will be reported to the magistrates.¹⁷ The *Ordinances* also make provision for weekly meetings of the pastors to maintain uniformity in doctrine and ensure conscientious performance of their duties, catechetical and otherwise.¹⁸

Following the adoption of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, Calvin set out to produce a new catechism. In late 1541 or early 1542 he published the first edition, in French, of his famous

Geneva Catechism.¹⁹ This represented a thorough reworking of the 1537 *Instruction in Faith*, completely reorganized and newly cast into a question and answer format. It is a lengthy document, consisting of 373 questions which Calvin divided into a series of 55 weekly lessons.

The catechism falls into four main divisions, each dealing with one aspect of the proper honoring of God. The first centers on trust, and explicates the Apostles' Creed; the second focuses on obedience with a commentary on the Commandments; the third considers our obligation to call on God in times of need, with an exposition of the Lord's Prayer; and the fourth speaks of honoring God by "acknowledg[ing] him with both heart and mouth to be the only author of good things"—in which connection Calvin discusses worship and the proper use of Word and Sacraments.

While this Geneva Catechism served as the basis for weekly instruction of the children, the actual service in which they confessed their faith before the church clearly required a more compact document. Serving this function was the *Genevan Shorter Catechism*, which appeared under the title, "The Form For Examining Children Who Wish to Receive the Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁰ This catechism is a short summary of the faith, whose twenty-one questions test the child's understanding of the commandments, good works, justification, prayer, sacraments, and the work of the Holy Spirit. It has come down to us in a number of versions, our earliest copy dating from a 1553 edition of the *Genevan Catechism*, into which it was bound as a companion piece.²¹

The final examination of children took place publicly²² on the Sunday before the quarterly communion service was to be held. Children successfully completing the examination would be admitted to their first communion the following week.²³ Though Calvin, as we have seen, thought initially that the desirable age for the examination and admission to communion would be around ten, evidence from the curricular plan of the Geneva Academy suggests eleven or twelve as closer to the mark in actual practice.²⁴

Any discussion of Calvin's catechetical work would also be incomplete without some mention of his work in public education. Calvin proposed an overhaul of the city schools as early as 1536. His initial efforts centered around the establishment of the *College de Rive* as a primary school serving the whole city. All children were required to attend, and poor families could send their children free of charge. Unfortunately the effort foundered²⁵, and it was not until the founding of the Geneva Academy in 1559 that Calvin saw his plans for public education in the city reach fruition.

The Academy consisted of primary school and an upper school, the latter offering advanced courses in theology in preparation for ministry in the Reformed churches.²⁶ Though much could be said about the work of this famous institution, for our present purposes we will confine ourselves to the observation that instruction in the catechism was integrated into all levels of the curriculum. Younger students received instruction every Saturday in preparation for their weekly recitations.²⁷ For older students, editions of the Catechism were prepared in Greek (1551) and Hebrew (1554) to be used as basic texts in their study of the biblical languages.

It quickly becomes clear even to the casual student of Calvin's Geneva that the entire city was, in a very real sense, an educational enterprise.²⁸ Nearly every sphere of Genevan culture—family, church, school, and civil polity—were marshalled and enlisted in a cooperative effort to school the young and old in the catechism and the ways of Christ. The question bears asking in light of all this what it is they thought they were trying to accomplish. What is it about catechesis which is important enough to demand all this coordinated effort? Calvin himself commends such instruction on a number of grounds.

First, and perhaps foremost, as we have seen, catechesis serves the honor and praise of God by safeguarding the integrity of the Lord's Table. Calvin follows Luther here in tying a

proper use of the Sacrament to a proper understanding of the Sacrament.²⁹ “It is a very perilous thing,” he writes, “for children as for parents, to introduce them [to the table] without good and adequate instruction.”³⁰ The reasons behind this can be found in Calvin’s understanding of what constitutes worthy participation. In Book IV of the *Institutes* he writes:

On this account, Paul enjoins that a man examine himself before eating of this bread or drinking from this cup. By this (as I interpret it) he meant that each man descend into himself, and ponder with himself whether he rests with inward assurance of heart upon the salvation purchased by Christ; whether he acknowledges it by confession of mouth; then, whether he aspires to the imitation of Christ with the zeal of innocence and holiness.³¹

Worthy participation in the sacrament requires assurance in the salvation purchased by Christ—which in turn requires an understanding of what that salvation is, what benefits it bestows and what obligations follow from it.

Second, catechesis is a means of defending and preserving the church from error. A congregation possessed of a knowledge of sound Christian teaching will know enough to benefit from sound preaching when they hear it, and to shun heresy when it crops up in their midst. In a famous letter to the Lord Protector Somerset in England, Calvin puts it like this:

Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never preserve itself without a Catechism, for it is like the seed to keep the good grain from dying out, and causing it to multiply from age to age. And therefore, if you desire to build an edifice which shall be of long duration, and which shall not soon fall into decay, make provision for the children being instructed in a good Catechism....This Catechism will serve two purposes, to wit, as an introduction to the whole people, so that every one may profit from what shall be preached, and also to enable them to discern when any presumptuous person puts forward strange doctrine...the Catechism ought to serve as a check upon such people.³²

Catechesis is the human vehicle for securing (with the help of the Holy Spirit) the future of the Christian community.

Third, catechetical instruction shows forth and embodies the baptismal unity of the church. In 1545 Calvin translated the *Geneva Catechism* into Latin, an effort which would make little sense if its only function were to instruct young children. But Calvin has another use in mind:

Since it is proper for us by every means to endeavour to make that unity of faith shine forth among us which is so highly commended by Paul, the solemn profession of faith which is joined to our common Baptism ought to be directed chiefly to this end.

How much more necessary it is now, in the dreadful devastation of the Christian world, that those Churches, which worship God rightly, few and dispersed and hedged about...as they are, should give and receive mutually this sign of holy fellowship, and thereby be incited to that fraternal embrace of which I have spoken?³³

A shared catechetical tradition is a manifestation of the unity which binds Christians together in the fellowship of their common baptism.

Finally, catechetical instruction represents for Calvin the grace of election working itself out in the context of the Christian community. The incorporation of infants into the people of God through the sacrament of infant baptism testifies to the free, unconditional, and utterly gracious blessing which God bestows upon his people. Election, however, leads somewhere. It manifests

itself. It works itself out and becomes embodied in the lives which it touches, in the form of faith, obedience, and outward confession.

The fact that God allows human beings to participate in this process is a stunning gift of divine grace:

We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church....As he did not entrust the ancient folk to angels but raised up teachers from the earth truly to perform the angelic office, so also today it is his will to teach us through human means... [A]mong the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.³⁴

The church's catechesis is a human participation in the grace of divine election, which leads Christians inexorably forward from infant baptism to inward faith, to outward confession, and finally to participation in the Lord's Supper. Thus baptism and catechesis are indissolubly linked: "For when we consider that immediately from birth God takes and acknowledges them as his children, we feel a strong stimulus to instruct them in an earnest fear of God and observance of the law."³⁵

Given the very close relationship between the catechism and the discipline in Geneva, it is appropriate at this point that we turn our attention briefly to the way in which the two functioned together. Especially when measured by twentieth century sensibilities, Genevan discipline has a tendency to come across as a regime of the iron fist, a dictatorial rule coercing unwilling citizens into a superficial religious conformity by threat of force.

This picture is almost certainly a distortion.³⁶ To begin with, an emphasis on moderation permeates virtually all of Calvin's writings on church discipline. The following passage from the *Institutes* is a case in point:

This gentleness is required in the whole body of the church, that it should deal mildly with the lapsed and should not punish with extreme rigor, but rather, according to Paul's injunction, confirm its love toward them. Similarly, each layman ought to temper himself to this mildness and gentleness. It is, therefore, not our task to erase from the number of the elect those who have been expelled from the church, or to despair as if they were already lost.³⁷

The section of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* which makes provision for church discipline calls repeatedly for fraternal admonition, but never mentions any sort of punishment beyond barring stubborn offenders from communion.³⁸

This picture of moderation is reinforced by an incident in 1549, cited by William Monter, in which Geneva's pastors and government agreed that great calamities were descending on the city, and issued an urgent call to all heads of families for everyone to attend church more regularly and for children and servants to come to catechism. "Much is said in this document about the intentions of Geneva's rulers and her clergy," observes Monter, "and much is said about the examples they were setting, but nothing at all is said about punishment. It is pure exhortation, unmingled with threats."³⁹

And yet this discipline, however moderate, is seen by Calvin as the "sinews" which bind together the body of the church. Without the discipline, Calvin believes that the work of catechesis would come to a halt and all the progress would be quickly lost: "If we should relax ever so short a time," he writes, "all the knowledge we have acquired soon dwindles away. For we are so full of vanities and evil affections that this will very speedily corrupt the good seed which God has

sown in us unless we be constantly intent on cultivating it, plucking up the evil, confirming the good.”⁴⁰

All in all, R.S. Wallace may have it right when he describes the functioning of the discipline in the following terms.

Discipline within any social group—family, church, city or nation—means that certain basic, high standards of morality and, indeed, of virtue are set for and expected of everyone. Those standards need not always be clearly defined or written down. They are embodied in the educational system, in the current ideals for family and home life. They are upheld strictly by enlightened public opinion. When the basic standard fails to be attained the erring individual is urged on by encouragement or reproof or by more progressively severe sanctions administered by those in authority who are themselves expected to prove exemplary.⁴¹

Genevan discipline may have functioned for the most part not so much by the hammer of coercion as by the steady pressure of social sanction within a carefully cultivated Christian ethos.

If the discipline created the kind of ethos within which the work of catechesis could take place, catechesis also served as a major resource for those overseeing the discipline. Robert Kingdon describes the way in which the Genevan Consistory dealt with typical complaints regarding unorthodox religious practices:

People whose problem was ignorance of Protestant practice were generally treated gently. If they could read, they were told to purchase a Bible and read it carefully. This advice was given, for example, to some ex-priests and ex-monks still living in Geneva. The majority who could not read were told to attend sermons, at least once a week, preferably twice a week, ideally every day. Many were also told to attend the catechism sessions organized every Sunday in the parish churches. These sessions may have been intended primarily for children, but they were also seen to be of value for adults.⁴²

Some people who were especially perplexed about the new faith and its implications were assigned special tutors. Kingdon recounts one particularly striking incident, in which an elderly man who had been summoned before the Consistory readily conceded that he was hopelessly confused about religious matters. As a remedy he asked if a child might not be appointed to tutor him, to which suggestion the Consistory readily agreed.⁴³ It is strong testimony to the effectiveness of Calvin’s program that a suggestion of this sort could be received matter-of-factly and as a matter of course!

II.

Having sketched out some of what was involved in Calvin’s catechetical program, we want now to consider briefly what were some of its distinguishing features in a 16th century context. We will do this by comparing Calvin’s *Geneva Catechism* with a Roman Catholic and a Lutheran counterpart.

One of the things which twentieth-century Christians find extremely impressive about Calvin’s Geneva is the rigor of the piety which the city embraced. Even in its purely outward manifestations—preaching services twice each Sunday and three times during the week in all the parishes, catechetical instruction and examinations, rigorous disciplinary oversight by a watchful board of elders—the character of Christian life as practiced in Geneva impresses us as demanding in the extreme.

This impression may be much more the product of twentieth century sensibilities than of anything distinctive about 16th century Geneva, however. As an illustration of this, I want to look

briefly at a Roman Catholic catechism entitled *A Fruitful Mirror, or A Small Handbook for Christians*.⁴⁴ This work was written by Brother Dederich Kolde of Muenster, and represents the first printed German-language catechism to appear.

Kolde's work was enormously popular. It first appeared in a small edition of 1470, and was subsequently revised and enlarged in 1480. This expanded 1480 version went through twenty-nine editions between 1480 and 1520 and was translated into several different languages. Its orthodoxy was attested by the theological faculties of Cologne and the Louvain, and it was probably among the most widely used Catholic catechisms in the early Reformation period. It has been called by modern scholars, "typical and even exemplary of the pattern of late medieval domestic catechetical literature."

Kolde's Catechism opens with a long section on what Christians are obliged to believe. The section devotes a single article to the Apostles' Creed, and from there moves immediately into lurid and extended descriptions of hellfire and the torments of the damned, along with a brief description of the glories of heaven for those who keep the commandments. There follows an incredibly detailed exposition of the Ten Commandments and all their attendant duties and obligations. The following excerpt from Kolde's explication of the Sabbath commandment gives something of the flavor:

This commandment teaches us that we are to keep the holy day with prayers, with remembrances and with thankfulness, and we are to avoid sins and be mindful of the good that God has done for us....Also, this commandment teaches that one is to show honor and respect for the holy places. Acting against this are all those who commit mortal sin on the holy days, because the sin is graver then, and doubled. Those who lead another person to sin with inappropriate sayings, especially in church. Those who gamble or play out of avarice, passing their time with ball games and the like, or those who fail to attend services because of such games. Those whose frivolous nature causes them to keep people away from church or lead them into sin. Those careless ones who live immodestly and impurely in the taverns or who take costly and unnecessary meals with dishonorable women. Those who buy or sell on the holy day, when it is not necessary, or those who open their doors and windows for that purpose. Or those who spend most of their time on holy days travelling to markets or settling accounts. Those who do tailoring, or sew, or shoe horses, or do washing or the like, or who have such things done without compelling reason. Those who work too late on the eve of a holiday and begin again on the holy day out of avarice. Those who spend practically the whole morning of a holy day putting on new shoes or clothes...⁴⁵

For all the emphasis which the Reformed place upon detailed attention to the commandments, there is little in the Reformed confessions which can match the likes of this!

After treating all ten commandments in this fashion, Kolde moves on to a host of additional precepts, positive and negative, each of which receives a similarly detailed exposition. Included in his survey are: the five commandments of the Holy Church which Christians are obliged to keep, the seven deadly sins and their daughters that proceed from them, the nine alien sins for which many people are damned, the openly discussed sins and the mute sins against nature which are seldom discussed, the six sins against the Holy Spirit which will never be forgiven, and so on. All of this, incidentally, is still contained in the section on how Christians ought to believe. We have not yet come to the section on how a person ought to live.

This overwhelming emphasis on minute description of possible sins indicates that Kolde's catechism is designed to prepare Christians for the confessional. Kolde belongs to a tradition of late-medieval penitential thinking which holds that God can and will, through the sacrament of Penance, bestow grace for the forgiveness of mortal sin. But the sacrament cannot be effective for any given sin unless that sin is specifically confessed, absolved by a priest, and assigned the

proper satisfaction.⁴⁶ A sin which is not confessed is beyond the reach of the sacrament and will have to be dealt with in purgatory. So these endless lists which we find in Kolde serve a very useful and necessary function in pious reflection and self-examination: they are designed to prod the memory, so that the penitent can recall all of the particular sins which he or she needs to confess.

Kolde's second long section describes how a Christian ought to live, and it resembles nothing so much as a monastic ideal applied to the lives of ordinary people. The following is a prayer to be said first thing upon getting up in the morning:

O almighty, eternal, compassionate God, how I waste my precious time, how lazy and indolent I am, how I will have to burn in purgatory for having lost my precious time so miserably. Further, during the night all spiritual hearts sang and read praise to God, and I slept. And there was also great joy in heaven, and I did not think about working so I too might find joy. And there was also great lamentation and distress in purgatory, and I did not pray about it...⁴⁷

The good Christian every morning laments the fact that he has not been up all night keeping vigils with the religious.

The catechism gives the layperson prayers to be said for all the canonical hours. It gives her instructions on praying the psalter and the rosary at least once a day. The Christian is advised to meditate constantly during meals on all the saints and holy people who have gone without food. If he awakens in the night he is to spend the time praying for the souls in purgatory.

Detailed instructions are provided for performing good works, and expositions are given of the seven spiritual works of mercy, the seven physical works of mercy, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the eight beatitudes, the nine noteworthy points that lead people to fall into sin, and so on.

Every hour when the Christian hears the clock toll, he is to engage in the following meditation:

O my heart, where are you now? What are you thinking of now? Are you now in the wounds of Jesus Christ? O dear Lord, give us a blessed hour when we die.⁴⁸

This meditation is to be followed by a Hail Mary and a prayer for all faithful souls.

At the end of the catechism Brother Dederich confidently asserts that all who read his little book and live by it will become holy and will be saved. But in a very poignant reflection he also reveals that he is personally very troubled by the fact that he does not know where he will go when he dies.⁴⁹ If an observant Franciscan Friar stands so unsure of himself before the demands of this piety, we can only imagine what its effect must have been on the average layperson who strove to take it seriously!

It is very clear, then, that what distinguishes Calvin's Catechesis and discipline in a sixteenth-century context is not the rigor of the Christian life to which it calls its adherents. If anything, the demands of Genevan piety seem rather modest in comparison to their Roman counterparts.

Calvin's vision of the Christian life is distinguished from Kolde's not by the fact that it is rigorous, but that its rigor is directed toward wholly different ends. Kolde's catechism, centered on the confessional, seems custom tailored to cultivate a sense of insecurity, as a spur to fervent devotion and use of the sacraments. Calvin, by contrast, sees in this kind of penitential piety the "cruel butchery" of the souls of the faithful.⁵⁰ Calvin's catechesis is designed to instruct and prepare Christians for the sacrament of the Table, the fruit of which is *assurance*: "[The Supper] was instituted by Christ that he might teach us by the communion of his body and blood that our

souls are being brought up in the hope of eternal life, and that he might make us certain of this.”⁵¹ Not the rigor of its piety, but the end of its piety, is the distinctive element in Calvin’s educational program.

A second feature which distinguishes Calvin’s catechism is the level of theological knowledge and understanding which he would require of ordinary Christians. Kolde’s requirements are very practical: the knowledge you need is that which makes it possible for you to confess the sins you have already committed, and to live in such a way as to avoid falling into new ones. The Apostles’ Creed consequently is all but passed over in Kolde’s work. He gives the text, but very little explanation accompanies it. In the context of Kolde’s penitential piety, there is scant reason for ordinary people to have any kind of grasp of theology.

Kolde undoubtedly is proceeding here on the basis of the scholastic doctrine of “implicit faith,” which holds that simple people do not need to know about doctrinal matters, that it is enough if they simply place their trust in the church’s learning, leaving the task of understanding to the specialists, as it were. Given the state of theological literacy in the Protestant mainline these days, this would appear to be a doctrine which has withstood the test of time!

Calvin, on the other hand, sets his face firmly against the doctrine of implicit faith, and he critiques it on the ground that it causes believers to place their trust not in God and his Word but in the fallible teaching of human beings. Responding to a defender of Catholic doctrine he writes,

Away then with that frivolous simplicity, which you say befits the rude and illiterate, of reverencing those with the greater learning and yielding at their nod! For if the name of faith is undeservedly bestowed on any religious persuasion, however obstinate, which rests anywhere but in God, who can give such a name to this kind of wavering opinion, which is not only easily wrested away by the arts of the devil, but fluctuates of its own accord with the temper of the times...?⁵²

Catechesis in Calvin’s understanding has as its task to lead people to a firm and heartfelt confidence in the Word and promises of God, and in order for such confidence to be genuine, Christians must *know*, in a reasonable amount of detail, what the Word and promises of God actually *say*. Calvin’s catechism therefore provides a detailed explication of the Creed, article by article. Faith in Calvin’s view “rests upon knowledge, not upon pious ignorance.”

But how much knowledge is enough? Calvin freely admits that there is always an element of implicit faith in every believer, simply because this side of the kingdom we are unable to attain to a perfect knowledge of God—we see through a glass darkly.⁵³ Even after the Roman understanding is rejected the question remains—how much theological knowledge is required of the average layman? This question brings us to a consideration of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, for the answers given on this particular issue will set Calvin’s catechism apart from Luther’s work.

Written in 1529, Luther’s *Small Catechism* grows out of the Reformer’s concern for the faith of the common people. Luther was shocked, in a tour of the rural parishes in Saxony, at the level of ignorance which the common people displayed:

Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts...⁵⁴

Luther’s Catechism is a short, relatively modest document which works through the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer article by article, asking of each one:

What does this mean? The catechumen typically responds with a brief explanation which includes some sort of application to life.

The theological expositions given are much less detailed than one finds in Calvin's work. Luther's treatment of the Christological section of the creed, for instance, from the virgin birth to the second coming, encompasses only a single question. To the query, What does this mean?, the catechumen responds:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.⁵⁵

Calvin's treatment, on the other hand, runs to forty-four questions and includes a detailed examination of: the significance of the name "Jesus"; the meaning of "Christ"; Christ's threefold office of prophet, priest and king and the benefits which each confers on believers; the meaning of "Son of God"; the nature of Christ's lordship; the immaculate conception; the atonement; the descent into hell; the cry of dereliction; the participation of Christ's human and divine natures in the crucifixion; the benefits of the resurrection; the mode of Christ's Ascension; the distinction between Christ's bodily and virtual presence; Christians' expectations of the last judgment; and the status of bodies in the final resurrection. Clearly there is a level of detail and theological interest here which sets Calvin's catechism markedly apart from Luther's.

This difference is displayed even in the tone of the dialogue. Luther's question and answer format, as we have seen, is very straightforward, seeking simply to make certain that the child possesses a basic understanding of the words which stand before him in the articles of faith. The *Geneva Catechism*, on the other hand, at times resembles nothing so much as a theological disputation, with the child frequently assuming the role of the learned *doctor ecclesiae*, who vigorously defends the evangelical faith in the face of skeptical cross-examination by the minister.

How to account for these differences? The answer, I think, lies with Calvin's distinctive conception of faith as *knowledge*. One of the remarkable things about Calvin's catechism is that it contains within itself its own self-justification. The student of the *Geneva Catechism* not only is instructed in an understanding of the articles of faith, but is also presented with an overarching theological superstructure which explains in some detail *why it is important* to learn and know these things.

Human life, according to Calvin, finds its end and fulfillment in God. This movement toward God takes the form of knowledge—not knowledge of a merely cognitive sort, which "flits about in the brain," to use Calvin's phrase—but knowledge which in its cognitive dimension also grasps and engages the whole person in faith, trust, obedient service, gratitude and thanksgiving.⁵⁶

So Calvin's catechism begins, "What is the chief end of human life?" And the response is, "That men should *know* God by whom they were created." And this knowledge turns out (by the power of the Holy Spirit) to consist in the engagement *both* of the intellect and of the heart. As the mind grasps the details of God's benevolence toward humankind, the heart moves toward a right and proper honoring of God in trust, obedience, gratitude, and devotion. And it is the process of growth in this special kind of knowledge, given by the Holy Spirit working in and through human diligence, which manifests the divine glory in the lives of men and women and moves them toward their proper end in God. Catechesis is, in an important sense, God's will for the fulfillment of

human life. Christian faith is deepened, and Christian discipleship energized, as the mind and heart together grasp in ever greater detail the inexhaustible depths of God's redeeming Word.

So Calvin's answer to the question of implicit faith—of how much knowledge is enough for ordinary lay folk—is not an arbitrary drawing of a line at some point along the scale. Rather, Calvin sees continued progress in godly learning as never-ending, as a lifelong vocation for every Christian believer:

We certainly admit that so long as we dwell as strangers in the world there is such a thing as implicit faith....The height of wisdom for the most perfect is to go forward and, quietly and humbly, to strive still further.⁵⁷

For this reason we could well expect Calvin to fashion a catechism in such a way as to provide a spur to further learning, to stretch the capacities of nearly everyone in the Christian community. In fact it is precisely this feature of the *Geneva Catechism* which sets it apart from its 16th century counterparts.

III.

In conclusion, we have seen how Calvin's catechesis represents the embodiment and the working out in human community of a unified and comprehensive vision of the Christian life. Calvin's instructional program is founded on the conviction that faith is deepened and discipleship strengthened not merely by the cultivation of an outward sincerity, but by leading believers toward an ever more profound grasp of the Word of God in all its depth and all its fullness. From Calvin we can perhaps learn a number of specific lessons on *how* to do education in the church—on the need to enlist church and family in a cooperative effort; on the necessity of a supportive ethos maintained by discipline; on the need for vigilance in upholding the integrity of the church's life and worship. But more important, I suspect, is Calvin's understanding of *why* we need to do education in the church: it is neither more nor less than our proper response to the electing grace of God, who calls human hearts *and* minds, human souls *and* intellects to the praise of his glory and the service of his Kingdom.

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NOTES

¹An English translation of Calvin's farewell address to the pastors appears in William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (Huntington, New York: Robert E. Krieger, 1975), pp. 95ff.

²At a general citizens' meeting on May, 1536 (Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 56).

³*Ibid.*, p. 95. John T. McNeill, it should be noted, considers this statement of Calvin's an exaggeration: see his *History and Character of Calvinism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 136. Cf. also François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), p. 49.

⁴The actual authorship of the *Genevan Confession* is uncertain. Theodore Beza in his biography attributes it to Calvin; modern scholarship has been more inclined to ascribe it to Farel. Whoever the final author was, it is almost certainly the case that Calvin had a hand in the project.

⁵The *Confession de la Foy* appears in the *Corpus Reformationum: Ioannes Calvini Opera quae supersunt omniae*, eds. Baum, Cunitz, and Reuss (Berlin-Brunswick, 1859-1900) (hereafter CO) IX, 693ff. A good English translation is in vol. 22 of the Library of Christian Classics series (hereafter LCC) under the title, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), pp. 25-33.

⁶Wendel, *op. cit.*, p. 52. See also CO X, 1.

⁷*Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église de Geneve*. The text appears in CO X, 5ff. An English translation may be found in LCC, pp. 48ff.

⁸LCC, p. 48.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁰*Instruction et Confession de Foy*. The text may be found in CO XXII, 33-74. An English translation appears under the title, *Instruction in Faith*, trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949).

¹¹Calvin was actually no stranger to catechetical work even at this early stage in his career. His 1536 *Institutes* had originally been conceived as a kind of catechetical manual for the Protestant faith. Consider, for example, the opening paragraph of Calvin's dedicatory epistle to King Francis I: "My purpose [in writing the *Institutes*] was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness....The book itself witnesses that this was my intention, adapted as it is to a simple and, you may say, elementary form of teaching." Translation is taken from Ford Lewis Battles, trans., *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 1.

¹²LCC, p. 50. Ironically, this is exactly what happened. Though scholars were aware that Calvin had authored an early catechism, the actual text was unknown until 1877, when a single copy was uncovered in Paris by M. Bordier (Fuhrman, *op. cit.*, p. 9).

¹³R.S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), p. 21.

¹⁴*Projet d'ordonnances ecclesiastiques*, CO XVI, 15ff. It is translated in LCC, pp. 58-72.

¹⁵LCC, p. 62.

¹⁶*1536 Institutes*, p. 130.

¹⁷LCC, p. 69.

¹⁸LCC, pp. 60-61.

¹⁹These dates are cited by T.F. Torrance in *The School of Faith: The Catechism of the Reformed Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 3.

²⁰CO IV, 147-160. An English translation of this document may be found in *Calvin Studies V*, (Papers of the Fifth Colloquium on Calvin Studies, Davidson College, North Carolina), ed. John H. Leith, (Richmond, 1990), pp. 152-154.

²¹Rodolphe Peter has pointed out the existence of yet another body of Genevan catechetical literature, in the form of primers used to teach reading and arithmetic in the primary schools. The practice of including material for religious instruction in these books apparently dates from pre-Reformation times. Calvin and his colleagues evidently edited and adapted the material in the textbooks to bring them into line with Reformation teachings. See Peter's article: "The Geneva Primer, Or Calvin's Elementary Catechism," in *Calvin Studies V*, ed. John H. Leith.

²²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (hereafter Inst.) IV.xix.13 emphasizes the public nature of these examinations. Cf. also Calvin's letter to Olevianus, CO XVIII, 236. Quotations from the *Institutes* are taken from the Library of Christian Classics edition, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) unless otherwise indicated.

²³Hughes Old, in a forthcoming book on baptism in the Reformed tradition, presents a reconstruction of this examination service based on evidence from the *Shorter Catechism* and the 1561 *Ordinances*. Old draws explicit comparisons to the 4th and 5th century services of *Redditio Symboli*, in which catechumens made public confession of the creed which had been given to them in preparation for baptism.

²⁴Rodolphe Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

²⁵The school's headmaster, Mathurin Cordier, was expelled from the city along with Calvin and Farel in 1538. Cordier's successor, Sebastian Castellio, also left the city under a cloud in 1544. Castellio had tried to enter the Company of Pastors in order to supplement his meager schoolmaster's salary, but his bid was rejected by the ministers because of his view that the Song of Songs was a lascivious document growing out of King Solomon's overheated youth. See R.S. Wallace, *op. cit.*, pp. 69ff., or J.T. McNeill, *op. cit.*, pp. 168ff.

²⁶For a good explanation of the work of the Academy, see Charles Raynal, "The Place of the Academy in Calvin's Polity," in Timothy George, *John Calvin and the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

²⁷*L'ordre du College de Geneve, 1559*: CO X, 75. An English translation of the *Order* may be found in W.S. Reid, "Calvin and the Founding of the Academy in Geneva," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. XVIII, Nov. 1955, pp. 22-23.

²⁸On this point see Harro Hoepfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 203-204.

²⁹See Luther's remarks in the preface to his *Small Catechism* where he compares participation in the sacrament to citizenship in the country of a particular king: "Although we

cannot and should not compel anyone to believe, we should nevertheless insist that the people learn to know how to distinguish between right and wrong according to the standards of those among whom they live and make their living. For anyone who desires to reside in a city is bound to know and observe the laws under whose protection he lives, no matter whether he is a believer, or, at heart, a scoundrel or knave.” *The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 339.

³⁰*Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, LCC p. 69.

³¹Inst. IV.xvii.40

³²J. Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin, Vol. II* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), pp. 191-2.

³³“Preface to the Ministers in East Friesland”: LCC 88-89, 89-90.

³⁴*Inst.* IV.i.5

³⁵*Inst.* IV.xvii.32. See also Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 17:1 and 18:19 in his *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses* in which the Reformer ties the duty of education to the grace of the Abrahamic covenant. *Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 1*, trans. John King, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948).

³⁶Our picture of the functioning of discipline in Calvin’s Geneva is in a state of flux. To date our most important source of information about actual practice has been the records of the Consistory. These records are written in an all-but illegible 16th-century French shorthand, and consequently almost all of the work done on these documents has been based on a series of transcriptions compiled by F.A. Cramer, a Genevan citizen, in the mid-19th century. All the Consistory material in the *Corpus Reformatorum*, for instance, is taken from the Cramer transcripts. As Robert Kingdon has recently pointed out, however, the Cramer transcripts represent only about five percent of the total record, and this five percent appears to have been carefully selected in order to present the juiciest, most scandalous cases recorded. Kingdon and his students are presently engaged in the laborious work of transcribing all the documents. For a survey of some early findings, see Robert Kingdon, “A Fresh Look At Calvin’s Attempt to Introduce Discipline Into A Reformed Community,” in *Calvin—France—South Africa: Papers of the Third South African Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. A.D. Pont (Pretoria: Kital, 1990).

³⁷Inst. IV. xii.9

³⁸LCC, pp. 70-71

³⁹Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 101

⁴⁰Letter to the French Church at Antwerp, December 21, 1556. Cited in Wallace, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-8.

⁴¹Wallace, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

⁴²Kingdon, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴³*Idem.*

⁴⁴An English translation of this work can be found in Denis Janz, ed., *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Lutheran, Anabaptist* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982).

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁶For an excellent discussion of late medieval penitential piety and theology, see Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁴⁷Janz, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵⁰For Calvin's vigorous critique, see *Inst.* IV.iii. 16-17.

⁵¹*Geneva Catechism*: LCC, p. 135.

⁵²*Reply to Sadoleto*: LCC, p. 245. Calvin's critique of the doctrine of implicit faith may also be found in *Inst.* III.ii.2ff.

⁵³*Inst.* III.ii.4

⁵⁴Preface to Luther's *Small Catechism, The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 338.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁵⁶*Inst.* I.v.9

⁵⁷*Inst.* III.ii.4