

Calvin's Polity and the Practical Theology
of Karl Barth
by
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The church is an ordered institution. It must be. Like any other institution involving mixed groups of people, it requires order. Or, as Barth is fond of pointing out, it takes an order, assumes a form, to manifest itself visibly in the world. That order is important for both Barth and Calvin because the church's order is reflective of the church's obedience. For both Calvin and Barth, faith is integrally tied to the form in which it expresses itself. It is not a hat or garments for the body but, rather, the shape of the body, what we can see of the body.

I think those sections of the Institutes where Calvin presents his polity are structured differently than Barth's consideration of the church's order in his theology. I don't intend for that to be confusing.

Both Calvin and Barth are very concerned with the order of the church. Calvin, of course, talks about the order of the church in Book IV of the Institutes--and Barth talks about the order of the community principally in IV 2 of the Dogmatics. Some have said that the difference between the two is that Barth is ambiguous about the form of the church while Calvin is not.

But Barth's ambiguity is deliberate ambiguity. What he is doing seems one step removed from what Calvin does. Calvin presents the order of the community. Barth presents the principles from which the community's order can rise. Barth deliberately avoids the specifics of a particular polity, and instead writes about the theological presuppositions which underlie church order. He sees many of these theological presuppositions underlying Calvin's polity, but these are implicit--Calvin's task is different, Barth believes--from his task. Barth says:

We can only indicate the general presuppositions which are theologically binding on all churches and their law. We cannot develop the law itself. This is a matter for different churches in different places and times and situations, (and it may often demand special legal knowledge and skill in addition to the necessary theological insight).
(p. 690, IV. 2 C.D.)

There is no such thing as universal church order. True church order, says Barth, as long as it arises from the general presuppositions, can develop in many different directions.

Are Barth's "presuppositions" underlying Calvin's polity? Toward this end, it is interesting to note where they locate the church. Calvin, of course, says, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not to be doubted, a Church of God exists." (LCC, XXI, p. 1023.) He has marks by which you can go and look for the form of the Church. But Barth avoids an identification like this. He addresses this in IV 1 in a section entitled "The Being of the Community,"

and his chief emphasis is on the verb is. To describe the church's being, he abandons the usual distinctions between being and act; here its act is its being. The Church is a work of the Holy Spirit which takes place among man in the form of a human activity. Barth says:

The Church is only as it is gathered, and lets itself be gathered and gathers itself by the living Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Church is when it takes place that God lets certain men live as his servants, his friends, his children, the witnesses of the reconciliation of the world with Himself as it has taken place in Jesus Christ, the preachers of the victory which has been won in Him over sin and suffering and death, the heralds of his future revelation in which the glory of the Creator will be revealed to all creation as that of his love and faithfulness and mercy. The Church is when it happens to these men in common...they receive the awakening power of the Holy Spirit, they are gathered and allow themselves to be gathered... (C.D. IV 1, p. 651.)

Barth (who often drops "the church" and instead uses "the community") believes the community is not the being of a state or institution, but the being of an event in which the Christian community is awakened, gathered, and at work. One of Barth's presuppositions is that the church is an event created by the Holy Spirit. And Calvin's Marks, in part, frame where this event is taking place.

Is the chief difference in the polity of Calvin and the practical theology of Karl Barth the fact that they see themselves as being about different tasks? Calvin is about the task of re-forming the Church, his new church waits for a specific order, and Barth is about the task of dogmatics, which seeks not a specific order, but the theological presuppositions for order. Barth says the church has the freedom, and exercises the freedom to accept and practice as true law, the law which it finds today (and then he likes to add "Today--until Tomorrow; until it takes further order.") (C.D. IV 2, p. 714.)

Calvin, relying on Paul's admonition to do things decently and in order, embraces order for the church:

We see that some form of organization is necessary in all human society to foster the common peace and maintain concord. We see further that in human transactions, some procedure is always in effect which is to be respected in the interests of public decency, and even of humanity itself. This ought to be especially observed in churches, which are best sustained when all things are under a well-ordered constitution, and which, without concord, become no churches at all. (LCC, XXI, p. 1205.)

Of course, the conscience is not bound.

Again, when it is recognized that the law has to do with common usage, then that false opinion of obligation and necessity, which struck consciences with great terror when traditions were thought necessary to salvation, is overthrown. For here nothing is required except that love be fostered among us by common effort. (LCC, XXI, p. 1206.)

For the order that is necessary, Calvin goes to scripture and, especially, to the witness of the New Testament church in scripture.

But here is the difference. Barth will not do this. It is not just a difference in their tasks. Barth cannot go to the New Testament for specific order; he does not believe it is authoritative here.

He says:

How authoritative is this controlling picture of the Church in the sense of faith, or the supposed New Testament ecclesia? "The Christ community is the great miracle of history," says Brunner. To portray the Church of the first centuries as such was the enterprise undertaken at the turn of the 17th century. But did these first Christians of Brunner's ecclesia . . . ever exist in such a way that they can be conceived of as the source and norm of all subsequent reflection on the problem of the church? Does it not need a good deal of imagination to accept this portrayal as genuine portrayal? To put it bluntly, did this great miracle really happen? Even according to what we find in the witness of the New Testament, not to speak of the first centuries? Does not this picture belong to the sphere of that which never was on land or sea, to the world of ideas and ideals? But even supposing that a kind of pneumatic community did actually exist in a recognizable form, the decisive question still remains how this community acquires the authority ascribed to it. When we say, "I believe in the Church," does this mean that I believe in a model picture of Christian community which I have discovered or addressed, or which has presented itself to me, and which I describe as a great miracle? Basically, is not the attempt to discuss the problem of the Church in terms of this criterion a romantic undertaking which makes no serious attempt at theological deliberation? (C.D., IV 2, p. 685.) (Barth is probably aiming at Brunner here, but he is hitting anyone who relies heavily on the New Testament model.)

His question is what is the authority for the criterion of the New Testament church for church order. It's not that he doesn't believe the New Testament and the early church are witnesses to a form of the body of Christ, but that they are witnesses to a particular form of the body of Christ. A particular form. This is not necessarily to be the law of the activity of the Christian community.

Barth says:

No church order is perfect, for none has fallen directly from Heaven and none is identical with the basic law of the Christian Community. Even the orders of the primitive New Testament community (whatever form they took) were not perfect, nor are those of the Western Papacy, the Eastern Patriarchate, the Synodal Presbyterianism which derives from Calvin's system, Anglican, Methodist, Neo-Lutheran and other forms of Episcopacy, or congregationalism with its sovereignty of the individual community. Nor are the orders of all different systems which are derivative variations of these basic types. There is no reason to look proudly and distastefully from one to the others. At one time they may all have been

living law sought and in a certain exaggeration found in obedience, and therefore legitimate forms of the Episcopacy, or congregationalism with its sovereignty of the individual community. Nor are the orders of all different systems which are derivative variations of these basic types. There is no reason to look proudly and distastefully from one to the others. At one time they may all have been living law sought and in a certain exaggeration found in obedience, and therefore legitimate forms of the body of Jesus Christ. Indeed, they may be this still. (C.D., IV 2, p. 718.)

For Barth, the New Testament does not attest a model of Christian Fellowship, but "The Life of the Lord in the community." The life of the Lord in the community.

This is Barth's basic presupposition which is normative for the community in every age. The true inquiry concerning what is the right order in the church will always be an inquiry concerning Christ's ordering and commanding and controlling and the corresponding obedience.

All order in the form of the church, to be true order, to be the church, must develop in obedience to Jesus Christ. It is this principle which is the basic law of church order for Barth. All church polity must be law which moves first from obedience to the Lord Christ.

This is why it is no surprise that in his whole section on "The Order of the Community" in IV 2, Barth quotes--refers even, to Calvin once. Calvin was fundamentally right, says Barth, when he stated, "As for the true church, we believe that it must be governed according to the true policy that our Lord Jesus Christ has established." (This quote is from Article 29 of the Gallican Confession of 1559.) The point of the quote is that Barth believed Calvin was right in his form of government, but not because it was particularly better than all others, but because it developed out of the centrality of Jesus Christ. Any government that did this was right. The basic order of the church is Christological.

Calvin's polity confesses that the church is founded upon God's Word. Or, in his words, ". . . the Church is Christ's kingdom and he reigns by his word alone . . ." (LCC, XXI, p. 1046). He cites Cyprian in his witness that Christ's headship is the condition of unity ". . . the source of concord of the entire church is drawn from Christ's episcopate alone . . ." (LCC, II, p. 1047.) But, while he might follow Barth in his radical Christocentrality which says, "Apart from Jesus Christ there is no other principle or telos to constitute and organize and guarantee this body" (C.D., IV 1, p. 663). Wouldn't Calvin's reliance on the New Testament church make him hesitate when Barth says even the Kerygma, the preached Word, cannot organize the Church, even baptism, and the Lord's Supper cannot constitute the Church . . . the faith and love and hope of Christians, the work and word of the apostle, cannot constitute or organize the Church (C.D., IV 1, p. 663)?

Calvin's polity and Barth's theology of the order of the community both recognize that the Church must have order, and all orders are not relative. Their tasks are different, but that alone does not account for Barth's deliberate ambiguity on the particular order of the Church.

They don't hold the same view of the authority of the New Testament church as a model for church order. Both Calvin and Barth believe the form of the Church must find its initiative in the lordship of Jesus Christ. But Barth finds under this lordship a spectrum of particular orders.