

The Church as the Congregation
by
Timothy George

The two burning questions of the sixteenth-century Reformation were, to quote the Philippian jailor, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:31) and, to quote St. Cyprian, "Where can I find the true church?" These are the concerns, respectively, of the third and fourth books of Calvin's Institutes: the basis of saving faith and the locus of the true church. Protestant theology accepted, almost uncritically, the orthodox consensus of the early church as embodied in the decisions of the first four ecumenical councils.¹ The real reformation of doctrine in the sixteenth century had to do not so much with the Person of Christ as with the Work of Christ, in particular with its appropriation through justification by faith and its communal embodiment in the congregation. As Melancthon put it: "To know Christ is to know his benefits, not to behold his natures or the modes of his Incarnation."²

Luther's quest for a gracious God found resolution in the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the article by which the church stands or falls (articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae). The gospel, then, for Luther was constitutive of the church; it was, as Werner Elert has said, "the real organizing principle of the church."³ The gospel begat the believers, gathered them into fellowship (Gemeinschaft) around pulpit and table,⁴ and united them into a supraindividual communion (Gemeinsamkeit).⁴ Ubi evangelium, ibi ecclesia: where the gospel is, there is the church.

The contour of the church, however, in its historical reality as opposed to its spiritual nature, as it was organized for example in Saxony or Nuremberg, proved difficult to define with precision. Luther sometimes referred to the church as ecclesia latens, the hidden church, or, with Wyclif and Hus and others before him in the Augustinian

¹On Calvin's approval of conciliar decisions, see Institutes, IV, 9, 8.

²Melancthon, Loci Communes Theologici in Melancthon and Bucer, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia, 1969), 21-22.

³Werner Elert, The Structure of Lutheranism (St. Louis, 1962), 259.

⁴On Luther's provisional concept of the church as a "gathered ecclesiola: and his influence on subsequent congregationalist traditions, see George H. Williams, "'Congregationalist' Luther and the Free Churches," Lutheran Quarterly 18 (1967), 283-95. On Luther's ecclesiology generally see the valuable article of Karl Holl, "Die Entstehung von Luthers Kirchenbegriff," Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte (Tubingen, 1923), I, 245-78, and Ernst Rietschl, Das Problem des unsichtbar-sichtbaren Kirche bei Luther, Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 50 (1932).

tradition, "the whole number of the predestined" (praedestinatorum universitas).⁵ Nonetheless, Luther was compelled by the exigencies of the Reformation to consider the church in its earthly aspect: to define it, however approximately, as visible and recognizable. To do this he spoke of the notae or tesserae, the marks or tokens of the church: the Word rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. For all this, Luther refused to equate institutional form with spiritual reality. Even in its most concrete form the visible church remains only a "mask," its reality as communion or fellowship perceptible by faith alone. Luther avoided what might be called "an ecclesiology of glory" by stressing the "givenness" of the gathered community, the source of its life in Christ, rather than its outward, empirical manifestation.

If Luther's predominant concern was with the evangelical center of the church, later reformers took up the difficult task of determining with some precision its circumference.⁶ Zwingli, Bucer, and Oecolampadius had each struggled with this problem, yet it remained for Calvin, a "poor, timid scholar" as he described himself, to exploit fully the theory and practice of the Protestant congregation. [The timidity, or temerity, the reticence of Calvin is an important note not to miss if we are to understand his work at all. Luther was made for the part. Zwingli was an intense activist; but Calvin was pulled kicking and screaming into the ranks of the reformers. Perhaps for this very reason he was able to bring both more dispassion and deeper engagement to the work of reform.]

Beset by a resurgent Catholicism on the one hand and a proliferating sectarianism on the other, Calvin developed a more formal theory of the relation of the invisible church and the church as an external institution recognizable as "true" by certain distinguishing marks. At the beginning of Book IV in the Institutes Calvin clarifies the function of the "marks":

For, in order that the title church may not deceive us, every congregation that claims the name,⁷ "church" must be tested by this standard as by a touchstone.

By so directly associating the marks with the act of testing and verification Calvin has surpassed Luther's concept of the marks as mere indicators of the visible church. They have become in some sense causative, constitutive of the visible church. Thus, in the Reformed confessions, the notes are distinguished from the traditional Nicene attributes (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) precisely because they are not merely descriptive, but dynamic: they call into question the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of every congregation which claims to be a church,

⁵WA II, 287.

⁶This image was first used by Gordon Rupp, The Righteousness of God (London, 1953), 310. A recent elaboration is P. D. L. Avis, The Church in the Theology of the Reformers (Atlanta, 1981), 13-63.

⁷IV, 1, 11.

and so subject it to an outward, empirical investigation. "In this way," say Calvin, "the face of the church emerges into visibility before our eyes."⁸

Significantly, Calvin did not follow Bucer, as did the Reformed tradition generally, in elevating ecclesiastical discipline to the technical status of a nota. For Calvin, as for Luther, the more certain (certioribus) marks remained the Word purely preached and the sacraments duly administered. However, he did not for that reason disparage the importance of discipline for the well-being of the church. If the saving doctrine of Christ was the soul of the church, then discipline served as its sinews (pro nervis), through which the members of the body were held together, each in its own place.¹⁰ Discipline, then, pertained to the constitution and organization, if not to the definition, of the true congregation. It belonged to the arena of visibility insofar as it too was a criterion of testing, both individually in self-examination and corporately in the public procedures of admonition, censure, and excommunication.

Calvin's concern for the order and form of the congregation derived from his emphasis upon sanctification as both the process and goal of the Christian life. In contrast to the unilateral accentuation of justification in the Lutheran Confessions, Calvin gave precedence to sanctification in his systematic arrangement of the "benefits of Christ." The two are connected as distinct but interrelated "moments" in the appropriation of the work of Christ. Together they comprise a twofold grace or double cleansing, so that "actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness."¹¹ In this life the locus of sanctification is the congregation, the visible church, in which the elect participate in the benefits of Christ not as isolated individuals, but as members of a body in which "all the blessings which God bestows upon them are mutually communicated to each other."¹² In this way the visible church becomes a "holy community," an agent of sanctification in the large society where every aspect of life is to be brought within the orbit of Christian purposes and Christian regulations.

⁸IV, 1, 9.

⁹However, in the first edition of the Institutes (1536) Calvin did include "example of life" among the "certain sure notes." Cf. Calvini Opera, I, 89. On Bucer, See Avis, Church, 48-50.

¹⁰Inst. IV, 12, 1.

¹¹III, 11, 1.

¹²IV, 1, 3.

II

Having examined the presuppositions of Calvin's doctrine of the local church, we now turn to a more specific elucidation of them as set forth in his commentaries on three of the pastoral epistles, namely those of I and II Timothy and Titus. The choice of these commentaries is suggested by the content of the epistles which deals explicitly with the order and organization of the congregation. Moreover, they were written in the late 1540's, seven to eight years after Calvin's return from Strasbourg, but six to seven years before the consolidation of his power in what has been called the second Genevan revolution of 1555. Calvin admits that he has not made as much progress in reforming the church at Geneva as he had wished: "we know by experience that it is not the work of one or two years to restore a fallen church to a tolerable state."¹³ These documents, then, written in the thrust of battle as it were, reflect Calvin's intense efforts to establish a godly congregation amid disturbances without and struggles within.

The commentaries on Timothy were published in 1548, prefaced by a dedicatory epistle to the Duke of Somerset, Protector of England and tutor of the boy king, Edward VI. To this well-placed partisan of reform Calvin commends the epistles to Timothy as providing "a living picture of the true government of the church." He urges him to follow the pattern laid down by Paul as "there is hardly anything needful for the building up of the church that cannot be drawn from them."¹⁴ Here we see Calvin as the episcopus of Geneva looking beyond national boundaries and the particularities of his local situation in the interests of an ecumenical congregational reform. The commentary on Titus, published the following year in 1549, was dedicated to Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret, Calvin's predecessors in the reform of the Genevan church--Calvin says he came to Geneva as their "assistant." Calvin claimed to stand precisely in the same relationship to these colleagues, who were then laboring at Neuchatel and Lausanne, as Titus had stood to Paul: he was their successor, charged with putting the "finishing touches" to the building which they had begun but left uncompleted."¹⁵

1. Calvin's Bipolar Ecclesiology. In his recent book The Christian Polity of John Calvin Harro Höpfl has argued that while Calvin's theology "began almost as apolitically as Luther's," with the visible church receiving only scant attention in the 1536 edition of the Institutes, that in fact his thought came to be more and more centered on the visible church until his early emphasis on the church as the communion

¹³ Commentary on Titus 1:5. All quotations are cited from Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, eds. David and Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids, 1964), vol. X.

¹⁴ Ibid., 182.

¹⁵ Ibid., 347.

of saints was almost entirely eclipsed.¹⁶ It is true that in successive editions of the Institutes Calvin's discussion of the visible church was greatly expanded, eventually achieving the status of an entire book. However, this was not done at the expense of Calvin's emphasis on the invisible church. The two poles of Calvin's ecclesiology, divine election and the local congregation, are held together in the closest possible connection, frequently in the same sentence. The church is called God's house, explains Calvin, because "not only has He received us as His sons by the grace of adoption (election), but He Himself dwells in the midst of us" (the congregation).¹⁷ Again, the upbuilding of the church is for the sake of the elect.¹⁸

Only when we realize that Calvin never relaxes the visible/ invisible tension can we understand his diverse characterizations of the church. On the one hand, the church appears in mortal danger. If false doctrines are allowed to spread, they will "completely destroy the church." Indeed, Calvin says that there is good reason to fear that the recently kindled light of reformation may soon be put out.¹⁹ At the same time, sub specie aeternitatis, human fickleness and unfaithfulness "cannot prevent God from preserving His Church to the end."²⁰

For Calvin the visible church is not a progressive approximation of the invisible. The former is a corpus permixtum, wheat and tares growing in the same field, whereas the latter includes elect angels, Old Testament worthies, and assorted predestined souls who find themselves outside the "Lord's walled orchard." Indeed, the inscrutability of election and the objectivity of Word and Sacrament (but not discipline!) underlay Calvin's reluctant extension of the title "church" to select congregations still in Roman obedience--"to the extent that some marks of the church remain, we do not impugn the existence of churches among them."²¹ This provided, we might add, a convenient rationale for not rebaptizing papist converts to Protestantism.

2. Ecclesia Externa as Mater et Schola. Calvin begins his discussion of the visible church in Book IV of the Institutes by

¹⁶Harro Höpfl, The Christian Polity of John Calvin (Cambridge, 1982), 34, 84-85. Cf. the following claim: "The universal church, the communion of saints, continued to recede inexorably from view, becoming at last no more than a device for dealing with the Creed's assertion of the one-ness of the church in such a way as to wrest this weapon from the Romanists," ibid., 84.

¹⁷Comm. I Tim. 3:15.

¹⁸Comm. II Tim. 2:10.

¹⁹Comm. II Tim. 2:17; I Tim. 1:19.

²⁰Comm. II Tim. 2:19.

²¹Inst. IV, 2, 12.

applying to it the well-worn metaphors of Mater and Schola. We are conceived in the womb of Mother Church, nourished at her breast, and enrolled as pupils in her school all the day of our lives.²² The interlacing images of the church as mother and school also recur throughout the commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles. The church is the mother of all believers "because she brings them to new birth by the Word of God, educates and nourishes them all their life, strengthens them and finally leads them to complete perfection."²³ The church is also "God's school"--the "pillar and ground of the truth" as the text reads--which instructs its students in "the study of a holy and perfect life."²⁴

The maternal character of the church is seen especially in its dispensing of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Calvin calls baptism "our entrance into the Church and the symbol of our engrafting into Christ."²⁵ He interprets the phrase "the washing of regeneration" in Titus 3:5 as baptism by water, noting that "God does not play games with us with empty figures [perhaps a swipe at Zwingli?] but inwardly accomplishes by His own power the thing He shows us by the outward sign."²⁶ For Calvin baptism is designed to confirm faith in the elect, a view characterized by Karl Barth as "cognitive sacramentalism."²⁷ Nonetheless, Calvin required that baptism be applied indiscriminately to everyone in the visible church. The congregation might be a mixed flock of sheep and goats, God alone knowing for sure who was which, but it could not be a company of baptized and unbaptized lest the civic order, and the proclamation of the gospel which depended upon it, be imperiled.

There is precious little about the Lord's Supper in the Pastoral Epistles and Calvin the exegete is properly silent about it. There is, however, one reference to the Supper which distinguishes the blessing of ordinary food at table from the blessing of the sacramental meal.

We bless the food that we eat to nourish the body in order to receive it legitimately and without uncleanness, but we consecrate the bread and wine in the sacrament supper in a more solemn manner that they may be to us pledges of Christ's body and blood.²⁸

²²Inst. IV, 1, 4.

²³Comm. I Tim. 3:15.

²⁴Comm. I Tim. 5:7.

²⁵Comm. Titus 3:5.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/4, 130. We may discern the view of Calvin behind the statement of the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) that to be baptized is "to be purged from the filthiness of sins, and to be endued with the manifold grace of God." Creeds of Christendom, ed. Philip Schaff (New York, 1877), III, 290.

²⁸Comm. I Tim. 4:5.

If anything, Calvin finds the image of the congregation as a school more attractive than that of mother. Indeed, he frequently combines the two metaphors. Speaking of Timothy's education he says:

Having been rightly instructed in the faith from your infancy, and having, so to speak, sucked in sound doctrine with your mother's milk, and having made till now continual progress in it, take pains by a faithful ministry to prove that you are still the same.

The church, of course, is a school from which one never graduates (this side of heaven, if then!), hence the need for continual instruction. The church is also, in the best sense of the term, a "reform school," complete with specified dress code, censored reading matter, compulsory attendance at chapel, and truant officers to deal with recalcitrant students! Calvin, in fact, insists that we give special care to the instruction of rebels:

Since the conversion of a man is in God's hands, who knows whether those who today seem unteachable may be suddenly changed by God's power into different men?³⁰

--a statement markedly similar to his description of his own "sudden conversion" by which God subdued his heart to docilitas, teachableness.³¹

3. Order and Office. The installment of a fourfold office of pastor, teacher, elder, and deacon was an essential component of the Genevan settlement of religion which brought Calvin back to his adopted city in 1541. Alexandre Ganoczy, among others, has argued that Calvin borrowed this fourfold schema from Martin Bucer, whose 1536 Commentary on Matthew had presented just such an arrangement.³² In any event, by 1541 Calvin had come to believe that such a pattern was mandated by Scripture; it was in fact the cornerstone of the new polity embedded in les Ordonnances Ecclesiastique.

One would think that a structure so essential to a "well proportioned" congregation would be amply set forth in the New Testament, especially in epistles expressly designed as manuals of church order. (Calvin, of course, nowhere questioned the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals; in agreement with modern biblical scholarship, however, he did see them as public letters on church order rather than private correspondence.) This proves not to be the case. Of the four offices, the lion's share

²⁹Comm. I Tim. 4:6.

³⁰Comm. II Tim. 2:25.

³¹Cf. the discussion of Calvin's conversion in T. H. L. Parker, John Calvin: A Biography (Philadelphia, 1975), 162-65.

³²Alexandre Ganoczy, Calvin: Théologien de l'Eglise et du Ministère (Paris, 1964), 298-99.

of attention is devoted to the pastorate, at which we shall look more closely in a moment. Nothing at all is said of the teaching office, and Calvin tends to conflate it with the pastorate. On the other hand, Calvin seems almost embarrassed by Paul's lengthy comments on the diaconate as opposed to the eldership, given the inverted importance of these two lay offices in his own polity.

Calvin does in fact hold the office of deacon in high esteem. Deacons are public officers in the church entrusted with the care of the poor. He urges that they be skilled in the Christian faith since, in the course of their ministry, "they will often have to give advice and comfort."³³ Indeed, the deacons in Calvin's Geneva should have been experts in what we call today social work as well as pastoral care since they both dispensed relief to the poor and tended the sick in hospital. Calvin admitted that the diaconate could sometimes serve as a "nursery [again the maternal motif] from which presbyters are chosen," yet he opposed the Roman custom of making the deacon the first step toward the priesthood. This practice was an invidious undermining of "a highly honorable office."³⁴

As to the eldership, Calvin notes that the word presbyteros describes not an age but an office. Timothy, to whom Paul was writing, was quite young; Calvin himself was only 27 when he was called to Geneva. As applied both to himself and to Timothy, however, the word presbyteros was synonymous with episcopus or pastor. Calvin discovers that there are in fact two kinds of presbyters in the New Testament. The textual basis for this "discovery" is the verse: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching" (I Tim. 5:17). He further explains:

The plain meaning of the words is that there were some who ruled well and honourably, but who did not hold a teaching office. The people elected earnest and well-tried men, who, along with the pastors in a common council and with the authority of the Church, would administer discipline and act as censors for the correction of morals.³⁵

Voila--le consistoire! Höpfl has claimed that Calvin erected the structures of the Genevan church, and then read them back into the New Testament.³⁶ While a more nuanced interpretation may be preferred, those of us who are not divine-right presbyterians must wonder if there is not at least a grain of truth in it.

³³Comm. I Tim. 3:9.

³⁴Comm. I Tim. 3:13.

³⁵Comm. I Tim. 5:17.

³⁶Höpfl, Christian Polity, 94-95, 137-39. Calvin's other "proof text" for the lay eldership is Rom. 12:8. Cf. also Inst. IV, 3, 8.

4. The Reformed Pastor. Calvin believed that the offices of prophet, apostle, and evangelist, so prominent in the New Testament, were temporary in nature and had ceased at the end of the apostolic age. Of the offices which are extant in this dispensation, that of the pastor is clearly the most honorable and the least dispensable for the proper order and well being of the congregation.³⁷ Höpfl perhaps overstates Calvin's "aggressive clericalism"; certainly he did not equate ecclesia and clerus.³⁸ For Calvin congregational assent was taken very seriously. His doctrine of the ministry requires that popular control and executive rule be tempered in the interests of communal edification. Still, Calvin did have what we can only call a sacramental view of the ministry.

In the spiritual upbuilding of the congregation, the appointment of pastors was second in priority only to the acceptance of pure doctrine. Indeed in Calvin's mind these two goals are so closely intertwined, they can hardly be separated. The New Testament terms bishop, elder (presbyter), minister, pastor, and sometimes teacher (doctor) all refer to the same office. What is the role of the pastor?--to represent God's Son (Calvin elsewhere uses³⁹ the term "lieutenant" in the etymological sense of "tenant lieu de")³⁹, to erect and extend God's Kingdom, to care for the salvation of souls, to rule the church which is God's inheritance.⁴⁰ Calvin held that there should be at least one pastor in every town, though of course some towns such as Geneva might have need of several pastors--in due course Geneva could boast an entire "company" of pastors.

How was a pastor to be chosen? Calvin considers whether in fact one should deliberately seek the office. While it is certainly wrong for an individual to "thrust himself forward" out of self-seeking ambition, it is proper for one moved by a godly desire to prepare for the office. "What are theological schools if not nurseries for pastors?"⁴¹ Yet one must be publicly called according to the order the church prescribes. In Geneva this required a prior examination and selection by the company of pastors (an intimidating prospect!), presentation to the city council, and approval by the common consent of the congregation.

This process would then be followed by ordination which Calvin described as a "solemn rite of institution" into the pastoral office. Calvin elsewhere refers to ordination as a sacrament, and admits that

³⁷Cf. Ganoczy's comment: "Le Pasteur est le ministre par excellence. Il peut assumer la fonction des autres ministres, mais les autres ministres ne peuvent pas assumer la fonction pastorale." Calvin: Théologien de l'Eglise, 300.

³⁸Höpfl, Christian Polity, 92-102.

³⁹Inst. IV, 3, 1. Cf. Jaques Courvoisier, De la Réforme au Protestantisme: Essai d'Ecclesiologie Réformée (Paris, 1977), 66-71.

⁴⁰Comm. I Tim. 3:1.

⁴¹Ibid.

grace is conferred through this outward sign. Indeed, he used language strikingly similar to his description of baptism. Ordination is not a vain or useless sign, but a faithful token of the grace received from God's own hand. Again, it is a "legitimate act of consecration before God, something that could be done only by the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴² We must be careful, however, not to impugn to Calvin an absolutist view of church polity. There is the curious fact that apparently⁴³ neither he, nor Farel either for that matter, was ordained himself. He also rebuked the refugee congregation at Frankfort for seeking to depose their pastor, Valerand Poullain, on the grounds that he had not been properly ordained. Concerning Poullain he wrote: "Those who first worked to plant the Gospel ought to be accepted as pastors without further formalities."⁴⁴ Calvin, then, was willing to allow a certain leeway in the method of choosing ministers. The pastoral office itself is never adiaphorous, but the details of appointment may be. It was precisely this kind of flexibility which enabled Calvin to influence, if not direct, an international reform movement in such diverse political settings as France, Poland, Scotland, England, and the Palatinate.

But why are pastors so important to the church? "Does not everyone have a chance to read the Scriptures for himself?" asked Calvin. Here indeed was the Protestant dilemma. Thomas Hobbes, looking back on the age of Calvin, would comment:

After the Bible was translated . . . every man, nay, every boy and wench that could read English thought they spoke with God Almighty and understood what he said, when by a certain number of chapters a day they had read the Scriptures once or twice over.⁴⁵

Such a prospect was no more to Calvin's liking than it was to Hobbes's. For this very reason it was necessary for pastors to carve or divide the Word, "like a father dividing the bread into small pieces to feed his children."⁴⁶ Pastors must themselves be thoroughly taught in the Scriptures, so that they can rightly instruct the congregation in heavenly doctrine.

The importance of preaching in Calvin's thought has been clearly set forth by Professor Leith. Calvin has no truck with those who arrogate to themselves the title of "bishop," who go about dressed up in

⁴²Comm. II Tim. 1:6.

⁴³A. M. Hunter, The Teaching of Calvin (London, 1950), 202 fn. 142, citing Doumergue.

⁴⁴Ibid., 203.

⁴⁵Thomas Hobbes, Works, ed. William Molesworth (London, 1839-45), VI, 190.

⁴⁶Comm. II Tim. 2:15.

theatrical clothes, but who in fact are "dummies who never preach"--an epithet which will resound in the Puritan excoriation of Anglican divines as "dumb dogs" who have a "bare reading" ministry. In a pastor profound learning must be accompanied by a talent for teaching.

There are many who, either because of defective utterance or insufficient mental ability, or because they are not sufficiently in touch with ordinary people, keep their knowledge shut up within themselves. Such people ought as the saying goes, to sing to themselves and the muses--and go and do something else. . . . What is required is not merely a voluble tongue, for we see many whose easy fluency contains nothing that can edify. Paul is rather commending wisdom in knowing how to apply God's Word to the profit of His people.⁴⁷

The purpose of preaching is edification. The pastor must not "fly about among the subtleties of frivolous curiosity"; he must not, to use Calvin's delightful word, be a "questionarian." Preaching must not only be sound doctrinally, it must also seek the "solid advantage" of the church, that is, it must be practical, applicable, discriminating.

The pastor is charged not only with preaching, but also with governing. "A pastor needs two voices," says Calvin, "one for gathering the sheep and the other for driving away wolves and thieves."⁴⁸ The disciplinary role of the pastor requires that his own conduct be above reproach. Calvin does not hesitate to advocate a double standard for clergy and laity. In discussing Paul's prohibition of polygamy for pastors (his interpretation of "the husband of one wife" requirement), Calvin observes:

He might have to some extent tolerated in others something that in bishops was quite intolerably disgraceful.⁴⁹

Calvin has not here relapsed into the two-tiered morality of medieval Christendom. He is concerned with the visibility of the church, with the "face" of the church. An unworthy minister can do irreparable harm to the congregation. For this reason he must hold to a stricter accountability.

5. The Church and the World. By rejecting the Anabaptist concept of the congregation as a conventicle sequestered from the environing culture, Calvin rooted his reformation in the "placed Christianity" of the medieval corpus christianum. In a perceptive article on "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," Heiko Oberman has argued that the relatively more progressive element in the Reformed concept of the state could be traced to Calvin's view of God as Legislator and King, and that the rule of God was not limited to the congregation only,

⁴⁷Comm. I Tim. 3:3.

⁴⁸Comm. Titus 1:9.

⁴⁹Comm. I Tim. 3:2.

but extended etiam extra ecclesiam: even beyond the church.⁵⁰ Calvin's commentaries on the Pastorals reveal a pattern of both interaction and tension between the congregation and the saeculum.

At times Calvin can speak in a manifestly sectarian tone about the exclusivity of the visible church. A right relationship with God is prerequisite for even the enjoyment of natural blessings. Every gift we touch is defiled by our sins and unclean,

till God graciously helps us and, by incorporating us into the Body of His Son, makes us anew lords of the earth, so that we may legitimately enjoy as our own all the wealth He supplies.⁵¹

Unbelievers are in fact usurpers and thieves! Everything which they enjoy may be regarded as "the property of another which they rob and steal."⁵² Rhetoric we might have expected from a communitarian sectary, not from a proprietary theologian like Calvin! His intention, I think, is not to disendow all non-Christians, but rather to emphasize the unity of redemption and creation, and to assert the sovereignty of Christ (not just God) over the entire created realm.

Far from advocating withdrawal from the world, Calvin urges Christians to be engaged in it. Their prayers are to be universal in scope; they are "to include all men in their prayers and not to restrict them to the body of the Church."⁵³ Christians are not to exalt themselves proudly over others, but to deal with sympathea, fellow-feeling, toward those who are extra ecclesiam, in hopes that tomorrow they may be added to it.⁵⁴

The rule of Christ is ideally manifested in the institution of a godly magistracy. Calvin lists three advantages of a well-ordered government: tranquility, gravity or modesty, and piety. In the words of Isaiah, Calvin urges the magistrates to be "nursing fathers" to the Reformation. They are to maintain not only civic order but also religious uniformity. Yet the ius reformandi is not an authority the magistrates are to exert independently of the congregation. The proper relationship of the two, which Calvin was still struggling to realize in Geneva when he wrote these commentaries, is illustrated by the example of a pertinacious heretic. After thorough examination--Calvin warns that Christians should not be hasty in labeling as heretics everyone who disagrees with them--and patient admonition, the obstinate heretic may be, must be, expelled from the congregation by excommunication.

⁵⁰Heiko A. Oberman, "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 21 (1970), 43-64.

⁵¹Comm. I Tim. 4:5.

⁵²Comm. I Tim. 4:3.

⁵³Comm. I Tim. 2:1.

⁵⁴Comm. Titus 3:3.

Beyond this the church cannot go. However, the magistrate is well within his bounden duty in bringing to bear what Calvin calls, somewhat euphemistically, "further measures of greater rigor." There is, Calvin notes, a difference between the duty of a bishop and that of a magistrate.⁵⁵

At the time Calvin wrote these words most of the "magistrates" of Europe were, of course, inveterately opposed to the very reformation Calvin felt they should be supporting. Calvin nonetheless counsels obedience to such rulers, just as Paul had done with respect to the magistrates of his day, all of whom were "sworn enemies of Christ." In the face of opposition and persecution Calvin calls for perseverance and prayer. The institution of the magistracy is ordained by God no matter how abused it may be by a particular occupant. "That is why believers, in whatever country they live, should not only obey the laws and the behests of the magistrates, but should also in the prayers commend their welfare to God."⁵⁶

Nowhere in the commentaries on the Pastorals is there a hint of the concept of resistance by the lesser magistrates, much less the right of tyrannicide advanced by later Calvinists. The decade following the writing of these commentaries, however, witnessed a heightened persecution of the Protestant congregations in France. Calvin's doctrine of passive obedience was pushed to the limit. Yet as late as 1561 he counseled Admiral de Coligny against armed revolt: "It would be better should we all perish a hundred times than expose the gospel to such a disgrace."⁵⁷ However, as Kingdon has shown, the Genevan Company of Pastors was drawn more and more into open support of French Protestant party. Calvin's own reticence gave way to full endorsement of the war efforts of the Huguenots on the grounds that legitimate magistracy was represented by a prince of the blood, Louis de Conde.

Despite the advances of the Reformation in Geneva, Calvin writes for a congregation beseiged by physical and spiritual enemies alike. The overriding impression which emerges from these commentaries is one of a church at war, in combat, its very survival a matter of intense struggle.

Satan . . . a thousand times a day draws us away from the right course. I say nothing of fire and sword and exiles and all the furious attacks of our enemies. I say nothing of slanders and other such vexations. How many things there are within that are far worse! Ambitious men openly attack us, Epicureans and Lucianists mock at us, impudent men insult us, hypocrites rage against us, those who are wise after the flesh do us harm, and we

⁵⁵Comm. Titus 3:10.

⁵⁶Comm. I Tim. 2:2.

⁵⁷Les Lettres de Jean Calvin, ed. Jules Bonnett (Paris, 1854), II, 382.

are harassed in many different ways on every side. The only remedy for all these difficulties is to look forward to Christ's appearing and always to put our trust in it.

The consummation of the congregation, the final establishment of law and order and reformation, must be awaited in patience by the faithful as the eschatological act of God.

III

By way of conclusion, let us ask how Calvin's concept of the church as the congregation may inform our own efforts to be a faithful people of God in a culture removed by 500 years and an ocean from sixteenth-century Geneva. Looking back over the road we have traveled, we can see that Calvin's doctrine of the church was itself a development of Luther's emphasis on the priority of the gospel. Both reformers shared a radically Augustinian theology of grace; both emphasized the sovereign initiative of God in salvation. Such a perspective would be a healthy corrective to the prevailing neo-Pelagianism of contemporary American Christianity. The true visible church is not an aggregate of like-minded individuals, each tub sitting on its own bottom, nor a social agency with only a slightly more spiritualized mandate than the Rotary Club. If the church is to retain its integrity in a secular culture, then we must see it again as the special creation of the Holy Spirit, a community which can point men and women to the transcendent source of their lives and of life itself.

Secondly, Calvin's concept of the notes of the church can serve as a critical principle to save us from the idolatrous tendency toward ecclesiocracy. Anyone who takes seriously Calvin's doctrine of the Fall will know that all institutions are inherently evil, including seminaries, synods and local congregations, though not necessarily in that order. The true church must always examine itself, and be examined, tested for authenticity, by its congruence with the notae ecclesiae: Word, Sacrament, and if we follow the later Reformed tradition and also Anabaptism, Discipline. Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda.

Third, Calvin's doctrine of the ministry encourages us to think of ways in which clergy and laity alike will serve the congregation.

Fourth, Calvin's vision of the rule of God obtaining even beyond the congregation points toward a more inclusive view of salvation in which the redeeming power of Christ thrusts beyond the heart of the justified sinner and beyond the boundaries of the church, to encompass the state, society and the whole created order. In a world where thousands of our fellow human beings perish from hunger, in a world which faces the possibility of sui-genocide by nuclear destruction, this aspect of Calvin's ecclesiology speaks with urgency to us all.

⁵⁸Comm. I Tim. 6:14.

Calvin, of course, is not an infallible guide to faith and practice, pace the claims of Calvin enthusiasts of various denominational pedigrees. He was, as Luther said we all are, simul iustus et peccator, at once righteous and sinful. We can only deplore his coercive view of society, his intolerance of dissenters, his acquiescence in the death of Servetus, notwithstanding his plea for leniency in the mode of execution. Perhaps we can all agree with the words of John Robinson, pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers, a devoted Calvinist and defender of the Synod of Dort, who remarked to the departing Pilgrims that he was determined to follow Calvin no further than he had followed Christ, since he was very confident that the⁵⁹ Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word.

⁵⁹For an assessment of Robinson's theology and its indebtedness to Calvin, see Timothy George, John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition (Macon, Ga., 1982).