

Opening Remarks for the Calvin Colloquium  
Meeting at Davidson College  
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by  
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On behalf of President Kuykendall and the faculty I am delighted to welcome the Calvin Society once again to Davidson. We hope that you will find the atmosphere and arrangements congenial. For our part we believe that it is most appropriate that ministers and professional scholars come together to discuss the thought of John Calvin at this Presbyterian college and we hope that you will continue to meet here.

We have recently celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth and this year we are observing the centennial of the birth of Karl Barth--and that of Paul Tillich as well. When Professor Leith called to ask me to open our conference he mentioned these celebrations and also the fact that this year marks the four-hundredth and fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Calvin's ministry in Geneva. He asked that I call your attention to this inaugural and say something about its "significance for the church today."

As you recall, Calvin's advent in Geneva in late July or early August of 1536 was anything but auspicious. In spite of Farel's insistent enthusiasm for Calvin, the Town Council agreed to his employment with what appears to be a cold reluctance, noting in their minutes only "the need of this Frenchman" as a teacher in the city. Although Calvin proved his brilliance in a disputation with Catholic theologians at Lausanne in October of that year, subsequent events support the judgment that the initial attitude of the city fathers remained unchanged.

It was not until January of 1537 that Calvin proposed his first reforms for the Genevan churches, and on the face of it they seem modest enough. Congregational singing was to be introduced into the service, catechetical classes begun, a study of marriage undertaken to determine its appropriate, nonsacramental place in the churches, and finally (and as it turned out, fatefully), rules for the celebration of the Lord's Supper were proposed. In respect to the Lord's Supper two issues arose. First, there was the question of the frequency of celebration. Calvin believed that it ought to be offered weekly, but agreed that monthly observance would suffice. The Council would agree only to quarterly celebration. Second, and more importantly, there was the question of excommunication. It was the view of Calvin that order and discipline required the exclusion of notorious persons from the Lord's table, and that such excommunication was a function only of the church exercised by its ministers. The Council, on the other hand, insisted that such exclusion was their prerogative, and they seem to have been supported in this view by a majority of the citizens.

We cannot here investigate in detail the reasons for this conflict. We can note, however, that it was predictable. Not only were civil authorities throughout the free towns of Europe accustomed to adjudicating matters of private conduct, but in Switzerland democratic develop-

ment had entailed transfers of authority from ecclesiastical to popularly elected civil bodies long before the Reformation. Decades earlier the Bishop of Basel had been forced to relinquish some of his authority to the local Burgermeister, and Zwingli, you recall, came to Zurich by a process of candidacy and election as the "People's Priest," and his reform was both permitted and empowered by the Town Council. Generally speaking, in the Swiss cities that went over to the Reformation, local authorities believed themselves competent to control the private morals of citizens, to hire and fire ministers, and to decide on liturgical and other ecclesiastical matters. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Genevan Council included excommunication among its powers. Popular support for this claim can be explained, not only by reference to the democratic principles thought to be involved, but also by the people's recollection of the abuses of excommunication by the Roman Catholic clergy. Thus Calvin's reforms stimulated the first expressions of "libertinism" in which some citizens refused to forfeit a "liberty" from clerical discipline which they imagined the expulsion of the priests had brought them.

Calvin saw the matter differently. Again, we cannot here review the possible theological bases for this decision in the first edition of his Institutes. Suffice it to say that, while Calvin could accept an overlapping of church and state authority which would not appeal to us today, he also understood quite clearly that the church must direct its own faith and life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and he would not relinquish this principle to either official or popular pressure. Calvin's insistence upon this point was the source of the controversy that occupied the end of his first year in Geneva--and which continued into 1538 with dramatic consequences.

Matters came to a head when at a conference in Lausanne in March of 1538 the Bernese sought to advance their influence over the Genevan reform by insisting that Geneva conform to their own practices in respect to liturgy (the use of baptismal fonts and unleavened bread) and feast days (observing New Year's, Ascension, Annunciation, and Christmas). Calvin and Farel probably held no great scruples against these practices, but they believed their adoption was a matter for the churches to decide. Theological discussion of these proposals was preempted, however, by the Council, which quickly adopted them under political pressure from Bern. When the ministers denounced this violation of the churches' control of their own worship, they were forbidden to preach. The blind preacher Corant refused to obey the ban and was jailed. In response to this attack upon the clergy both Calvin and Farel mounted their pulpits to protest and were dismissed from office and expelled from the city. So ended the beginning of Calvin's ministry in Geneva.

At the time it certainly seemed to Calvin that his first years in Geneva ended in failure. However, the principle he there established, of the integrity and independence of the church in the face of every civil and cultural attempt to control its witness, became both the cornerstone of the reform he would successfully lead upon his return two years later and one of the greatest contributions of the Reformed tradition--whose heirs we are.

State intrusion upon the freedom of the church and its gospel did not end with the sixteenth century. In our own time we have seen it under fascism, continue to see it under communism, and recently have witnessed it in South America with the assassination of Bishop Romero by state-supported para-military terrorists and in South Africa where state police have arrested entire congregations for protesting apartheid and praying for detained persons. The danger presented by such state activity is very real and deserves the condemnation it has received from churches around the world. But unless I am mistaken the church today is challenged equally by another danger, which Calvin also faced, namely, the imposition of public opinion and ideology upon its program and message.

What can only be called the ideological captivity of the church is evident in many of our sister churches in South Africa where Afrikaner culture, politics, and economics have subverted the gospel to a racist "theology." Closer to home, we have the so-called "Moral Majority," whose membership is certainly not restricted to the sectarian and fundamentalist churches. This popular ideology preaches a message more informed by conservative economics, politics, and militarism than by scripture, and the ministers and churches that embrace it prosper.

That the major denominations of the Reformed tradition have officially rejected such a conservative ideology is commendable. Self-congratulation, however, would be premature, as there exists in the programs and pronouncements of our churches an ideological captivity of a different sort. On a recent trip to South Africa I not only observed a popular racist theology, but also the extent to which an alien ideology has intruded into the theology of some who are fighting apartheid. Many of them have subscribed to the Kairos document which calls upon the churches to adopt a "social analysis" of their situation, to follow the leadership of revolutionary organizations, to reject reconciliation as goal for that society, and in general (it seems to me) to accept the inevitability of revolutionary violence. Given the intransigence and brutality of the Botha regime, the influence of that ideology is not surprising. I must confess, however, that I was both shocked and dismayed when at the close of a communion service during an emergency meeting of the World Council of Churches in Harare the majority of those assembled sang the last hymn with raised clenched fists! Both at home and abroad the church seems all too willing to accept an ideological imposition upon its message.

To call attention to this danger will not, I hope, be construed as a rejection of "liberation theology," which otherwise speaks with a prophetic clarity and integrity much needed in the church today. But if we are to be true to the principle with which Calvin began and ended his first Geneva period, we must be more vigilant and more consistent in rejecting every attempt by government and popular opinion, by ideologies from the right and the left, to subvert the message and the program of the church. We need to hear again Elmer Homrighausen's call to "let the church be the church," and remember the Barmen declaration that the church can recognize "no other power or authority" over its life than that of Jesus Christ.

If we take to heart the lesson of Calvin, we need not be surprised if we experience the same kind of treatment. To undertake ministries of preaching and teaching dependent upon the Word of God, and thus independent of both popular conservatism and the regnant liberalism of ecclesiastical as well as academic authorities, is not a course calculated to produce prosperity. But this, in my view, is the challenge of Calvin's first years in Geneva.

Thank you for your attention, and welcome again to Davidson.