

THE CHURCH AS THE ELECT
IN THE THEOLOGY OF CALVIN

by
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The doctrine of election is basic to Calvin's understanding of the church. Although there is a definite tendency for Calvin to stress increasingly the visible church, emphasizing the role of the ministry, church discipline, and the sacraments as external aids and means for upbuilding the life of the saints, the church always remained more than it ordinarily appeared to be. The comment of Hans Kung, that "the Church will be heading for disaster if it abandons itself to its visible aspects and, forgetful of its true nature, puts itself on the same level as other institutions,"¹ would, if translated into sixteenth century terms, have received a hearty approval from Noyon's most famous expatriate.

Calvin believes that election is the foundation of the church for several reasons. As he reads Scripture, the election of God is primary for the creation of his own people. This people has existed from the beginning (under various forms and even in a hidden condition). In addition, this church universal cannot be limited to any one institutional form in a still sinful world. Consequently, however much one might identify the church with its visible marks--the Word preached and heard and the sacraments rightly administered--and this visible church with the elect, the true church is ultimately invisible, eternal, and invincible because of the sure foundation of divine election. It is distinct but not separate from the visible church.² Taking this middle position, which owes much to Augustine and Bucer² as well as to Scripture, Calvin, therefore, cannot hold the view that the true church is holy or perfect and at the same time fully visible, for there appears to be no biblical warrant for making perfectionism the basic definition of the church, whether in the writings of the Old or New Testament. Against the Anabaptists he contends that the church is always mixed. Nor can he say that the true church inheres in certain external signs--with the exception of preaching and sacraments--such as are found in a visible hierarchy, for there seems to be no biblical warrant for requiring that the people of God, from Abraham onwards, must always have had only one form. Indeed, what makes the church is, Calvin asserts, God's election. Against Roman Catholics he contends that the true church is frequently hidden within the visible churches and is dependent only upon the Word.

¹Hans Kung, The Church ("Image Books"; Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 62.

²See François Wendel, Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), pp. 142-43 and J.S. Whale, The Protestant Tradition: An Essay in Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 151-52.

Calvin's position has been both praised and criticized. We will pass over the praise it has received since this paper generally takes a positive view of his contention that the church is the whole number of the elect. On the negative side, his view has been criticized, for example, by Geddes MacGregor. Recognizing that for Calvin the church is inseparable from his predestinarian theology, MacGregor suggests that in linking them Calvin fell "inevitably into a great error," the error being that there is a hidden specter of the true church known only to God. "Predestination," then, "is outside the temporal order; the Church is within this,"³ and the two are not joined by Calvin. In response to MacGregor's criticism one can only repeat that it was not Calvin's intention to allow things to fall apart in this manner; rather, he insisted that one had not gone far enough if one thought of the church only as the elect (invisible) and did not at the same time regard oneself as part of that group and honor the visible church through which that awareness came by word and sacrament. The tension remains, to be sure, but it is the tension of the middle way held together by the concept of faith as expressed in Calvin's view that one believe the church rather than believe in it. Others, frequently of a Roman Catholic background, have criticized Calvin's doctrine of the church as being highly individualistic and as obviating any real sense of community.⁴ From here and there God plucks individuals out by election. Again the tension is evident, but Calvin contends that there is a company of believers and that the elect are a people united to Christ and therefore one, as a communion of believers, even to the point, he intimates in the 1536 Institutes, of sharing their goods.⁵ In response to both of these criticisms, it should also be pointed out that Calvin had no intention of endorsing a spiritualist conception of Christianity.

While there are negative evaluations of Calvin's doctrine of the church which focus upon its alleged tendency to float free from its moorings in the concrete world, there are others who criticize it for becoming too immersed, after 1539, in the realm of the visible church.

³Geddes MacGregor, Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church According to the Reformed Tradition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 49.

⁴Killian McDonnell, John Calvin, the Church and the Eucharist (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 363-64; George H. Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 109; and Johannes Witte, Het problem individu-gemeenschap in Calvijns geloofsnorm (2 vols., Frankener: T. Wever, 1949), II, 358-59. Also Karl Barth, The Doctrine of God ("Church Dogmatics"; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), II/2. 307.

⁵John Calvin, Institution of the Christian Religion (1536), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), pp. 85-86; Opera Selecta, ed. Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel I (5 vols., Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1926), I, 91-92. Hereafter cited as OS.

If I understand what he is saying, this seems to be the thrust of Harro Hópf1's book on The Christian Polity of John Calvin. Almost in reaction to his earlier negative view of the church, Hopfl says, Calvin now defines the church in terms of an "aggressive clericalism" and church discipline.⁶ He suggests, as well, that it is the visible church which triumphs in Calvin's thought and this, rather unfortunately, leads to the famous Genevan theocracy. While to call it aggressive clericalism may be an overstatement, and while one cannot deny that there is an increased emphasis upon the visible church for the Institutes reflect the battles of Geneva, one must be careful, nonetheless, not to overlook the fact that both the early and late Calvin continued to understand the church as the whole number of the elect. What is more important, he appears to return to that emphasis, by way of grace notes, in the 1559 Institutes, thereby indicating that he has not lost track of his earlier view of election as the foundation of the church. In a word, he turns from addressing the microcosmic situation of Geneva to that other world where the denomination of the church as the elect still has that first generation élan and relevance. If there is admitted special pleading in this paper it is that one must remember that Calvin is of the first generation of reformers in France, continues to reflect its concerns--he after all did not want to be in Geneva--and must be read, even in the Institutes, as addressing the role of the poor, suffering, little churches of his native land and elsewhere. This is not, per se, a criticism of the view which states that Calvin was a person of only one book--though that caveat is in order--it is merely an effort to point out that Calvin writes about what he is involved with in Geneva. Frequently, those opinions subsequently turn up somewhere in the Institutes. Therefore, the Genevan context must be kept in mind but not allowed to overcloud the equally important fact that Calvin was at heart extra-Genevan in orientation. If they are to prosper, these little churches, which are part of the whole number of the elect, must move to a more visible understanding of the church. My criticism of Hópf1 is that he seems to suggest that Calvin has completely left behind the earlier, more universal point of view and come, finally, to identify the visible church (well-ordered in Geneva) with the true church. No doubt this plays a part in Hópf1's statement, in an appendix on "Predestination," that he has not treated the doctrine of predestination in his study because it has so little, if anything, to do with the visible church.

One other preliminary remark may be in order. Although there is a discussion of election in the treatment of ecclesiology in the 1536 Institutes and all subsequent editions, it is its relation to soteriology which Calvin develops more fully in his later writings. Some few items which are mentioned in passing in the 1536 section on the Creed are later transferred to the soteriological context and end up in Book III of the 1559 edition. In Calvin's final thinking through of his

⁶Harro M. Hópf1, The Christian Polity of John Calvin ("Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics"; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 103-104.

⁷Hópf1, pp. 2 and 227.

theology, the doctrine of predestination is primarily soteriological, not ecclesiological. But this should not cause one to conclude that it has dropped from consideration in his view of the church and that it is replaced by the church merely as an external aid and means. Rather, Book III (the soteriological locus classicus) becomes, in effect, the description of the inner reality of the church which in Book IV is treated in its external expression. That inner reality, as chapters 21-23 surely indicate, is rooted in gracious, divine election.

There are four things which this paper sets as its agenda: (1) to examine the changing definitions of the church as they related to election in Calvin's Institutes and other selected public writings; (2) to consider those aspects in the 1559 Institutes which appear to return to an earlier emphasis; (3) to offer a comment upon his view of election as the foundation of the church; and (4) to attempt to draw some consequences (and benefits perhaps) from his view of the church as the elect.

I

1536 Institutes. Although there is an earlier discussion of election in a soteriological context (in Chapter I on "the Law"), the lengthiest in the 1536 Institutes, though nonetheless rather brief by later standards, and the one always cited in discussing Calvin's doctrine of election at this early time is found in Chapter II. It is located in his treatment of the fourth part of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, eternal life." Calvin opens this section with the following statement:

We believe the holy catholic church--that is the whole number of the elect, whether angels or men ...; of men, whether dead or still living; of the living, in whatever lands they live, or wherever among the nations they have been scattered--to be one church and society, and one people of God. Of it, Christ, our Lord, is Leader and Ruler, and as it were Head of the one body, according as, through divine goodness, they have been chosen in him before the foundation of the world ... in order that all might be gathered into God's Kingdom.

This church is catholic or universal because the whole number of the elect are one body in Christ. It is holy as well because those who are chosen are chosen to holiness as Romans 8:30 suggests.

⁸Institution (1536), p. 78; OS 1, 86: "credimus sanctam ecclesiam catholicam, hoc est, universum electorum numerum, sivi angeli sint, sivi homnes ...; ex hominibus, sivi mortui, sivi adhuc vivant; ex viventibus, quibuscunque in terris agant, aut ubivis gentium dispersi sint: unam esse ecclesiam ac societatem et unum Dei populum cuius Christus, Dominus noster, dux sit et princeps, ac tanquam unius corporis caput; prout in ipso divina bonitate electi sunt, ante mundi constitutionem, ut in regnum Dei omnes aggregarentur." See "Appendix," #I.

Calvin then adds other topics related to election and church. The method of God's operation in this catholic and holy church is through calling and justification. This is the means whereby the eternal election of God is made known. Again there is the appeal to Romans 8 which suggests the manner by which we may recognize the children of God. One must admit, however, that the visible church which is before us is a mixed church. From this view of the church as the whole number of the elect there flow certain consequences which Calvin enumerates. First, its members cannot perish or come to a "bad end. For their salvation rests on such a sure and solid bed, that, even if the whole fabric of the world were to fall it itself could not tumble and fall." This is true because the church is the "people of God's elect." This⁹ church "stands with God's election, nor can it change or fail . . ." Second, Christ has become the guardian of the members of this elect people of God. Third, it follows that since the basis of the church is election, then there was "no time from the creation of the world which the Lord did not have his church upon the earth; also that there will be no time, even to the end¹⁰ of the age, when he will not have it, even as he himself promises . . ." Finally, since we are dealing with a mixed church, we cannot tell who has been chosen and who condemned. We should not seek to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of this problem. Yet, we are not without support,

For since Christ our Lord is he in whom the Father, from eternity has chosen those he has willed to be his own and to be brought into the flock of his church, we have a clear enough testimony that we¹¹ are among God's elect and of the church, if we partake in Christ.

How is one to partake of Christ? It is by faith that "we possess Christ and all that is his"; and so "we also through him have been adopted as children of God, and are his brothers and companions in such a way as to be partakers of the same inheritance (the Kingdom of Heaven)."¹² Let us remember, Calvin says, returning to an earlier point, that the church can only be regarded as catholic if we believe we are part of it.

With the caveat that distinguishing the elect from the reprobate is God's prerogative, Calvin next turns, nonetheless, to a consideration of how one may determine who are the elect. It is not through the power of the keys, he asserts. The church, namely the papacy, cannot remove one from the rolls of the elect. Yet, so far as any may be sure, there are certain clear marks. Where one finds individuals who "profess with us the same God and Christ by confession of faith, example of life and participation in the sacraments," all these "ought by some sort of judgment of love . . . (to) be deemed elect and members of the church."¹³

⁹ Ibid., p. 80, OS 1, 87.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 81; OS 1, 88.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 82; OS 1, 89.

This, one may assume, is Calvin's list of criteria which he hoped would be used by the King of France, in relation to the members of these new evangelical communities and by the communities themselves in sorting through, for the purposes of church discipline, the lump God had given them.

A close reading of the foregoing paragraphs suggests that Calvin has dealt with the question of the identification of the elect from two perspectives: from that of the inquiring or troubled individual--to whom he counsels faith as the key to partaking in Christ--and from that of those who have ecclesiastical oversight of some flock of evangelical Christians--to whom he advises the famous judgment of charity. In addition, an attentive reading of these paragraphs leads one to conclude that Calvin has already begun to speak of the visible church and the questions which it faces, particularly in terms of ecclesiastical discipline. Thus, he follows his discussion of the identification of the elect, which culminates with the counsel of the judgment of charity, with one on the role and scope of excommunication. It is permissible, he states, to judge for the time being that certain individuals are estranged from the church. Excommunication under these conditions does not irrevocably expunge them from the church; that remains dependent upon their election status. Even where there appear to be clear signs that individuals have committed one of the sins against the Holy Spirit, it is rarely if ever possible that that may be known and so it is "more discreet to plan to await the day of revelation."¹⁴

Having drawn a blank on being able "to distinguish individually those who belong to the church," Calvin next turns to his slightly modified version of the Augsburg Confession's statement of whether we can, nonetheless, be sure that the church of God exists in the world. It is to be found "where we see the Word of God purely preached and heard (heard is Calvin's addition), (and) where we see the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution."¹⁵ The verb "see" suggests that Calvin is dealing with the visible church which can exist even where only two or three are gathered together in Christ's name. It is important to underline this emphasis upon the visible church in the 1536 Institutes, for this is the edition about which it has been said that Calvin speaks almost exclusively about the invisible church.¹⁶ That seems to be an exaggeration, based upon not having read closely what he says and upon having put too much stock in his statement that there is a church which "cannot be seen with the naked eye."¹⁷ Consequently, some scholars have overlooked this Institutes' emphasis upon the visible church. Yet, it is to be found in such discussions as those dealing with the power of the keys, the judgment of charity,

¹⁴Ibid., p. 83; OS 1, 90; emphasis added.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 83; OS 1, 92.

¹⁶Willem Balke, Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals, trans. William J. Heynen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), p. 49.

¹⁷Institution (1536), p. 85; OS 1, 91.

excommunication, and, most importantly, the marks or signs of the true church. All of these are either things done or functions exercised by someone to or in behalf of someone else. The judgment of Doumergue still seems to be correct--one assessed by Höpfl to be "almost laughable"¹⁸--that the subsequent introduction (in 1539) of the distinction between visible and invisible was merely a change in terminology.¹⁹ This correction is mentioned because it is common to say that in the 1536 Institutes the church is conceived in terms of an invisible church, but by the time of the 1539 edition, the parish experience which preceded it, and the influence of Bucer, Calvin speaks of both an invisible and a visible church. What seems rather to be the case is that in 1536 already he held the position of Bucer, a church both visible and invisible, although admittedly not so clearly articulated.²⁰

Calvin does not, of course, relate the visible church to clergy, the one clear sign of the visibility of the church among the papists. And, therefore, he can say that it is invisible in the sense of not being clergy oriented and, as well, "not a physical thing which ought to be subjected to our sense perception, or enclosed within a definite space, or fixed in some spot (or See)."²¹ But can it exist without the true marks as he understands them? The answer is apparently "yes," for in the "Preface to the King of France" he affirms "that the church can exist without any visible appearance." Such an absence is not to be wished, however, for it represents a time when there is a "dreadful visitation of God upon the earth." At those times God "removes from men's sight the external notion of his church" and, in fact, leaves the world without a visible form of his true church "so that no form of the church (then) remained."²² Yet, in these times God preserves his own children "though scattered and hidden in the midst of these errors."²³ There appears, in short, to be a certain tension between the "Preface" and the text of the 1536 Institutes, with the former taking a harder position on the invisible nature of the church of the elect, while the exposition of the Creed moves rather easily back and forth from invisible to visible. In both cases, it is clear that whether the true marks are present or temporarily absent, the church consists of the whole number of the elect who are called into it and protected by God. By 1539 he will draw back from saying that the church can exist without any of the true marks, averring that even in the Roman churches God

¹⁸Höpfl, p. 37.

¹⁹So Emile Doumergue, Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps (7 vols., Lausanne: G. Bridel et cie, 1899-1927), V. 28-29.

²⁰See Wendel, p. 296.

²¹Institution (1536), p. 85; OS 1, 91.

²²Ibid., pp. 12-13; OS 1, 31.

²³Ibid., p. 13; OS 1, 31-32.

has maintained the vestige of baptism as a witness to his covenant.²⁴ Thus, it is the text of the Institutes and not the "Preface" which should receive the greater weight and which in its blending of the concepts of invisible and visible lays the foundation for the not-so-surprising²⁵ increased emphasis upon the visible church in later writings.

There are one or two other references to election and the church in this discussion of the Creed, but the only significant one occurs in his comments upon the communion of the saints. This phrase is taken to mean "all the elect (who with true faith worship God together)"--hardly an invisible phenomenon--and who as the whole elect community²⁶ have reciprocal communication and participation in all goods."

1537 Instruction. The beauty of the 1537 Instruction is that it sets forth clearly in one paragraph what Calvin had taken somewhat longer to say in the Institutes. Four times the term election is linked to the church with the tongue²⁷ being set by the familiar equation of the church as "all the elect." What is somewhat surprising, however, is that there is neither reference nor allusion to the visible/invisible contrast, suggesting that that distinction, to which Calvin will return in the 1539 Institutes and give it final form in that of 1543, can be made into greater importance than it merits. In 1543 it appears, among other things, to serve as an organizing principle for his materials. Here, the church is simply defined as the elect. If one were to come to this definition first--as no doubt some did--one would get the impression that there is a clear connection between election and the visible church. The thrust of the passage, in any case, is to instruct the reader that he or she, having left the Roman church, is, nonetheless, in the true church.

1539 Institutes. Two things strike one immediately upon examining the 1539 Institutes discussion of the church. First, there is a slight change in some of the terminology and the addition of two new terms. The whole number of the elect has now become "all the multitude of

²⁴ Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (2 vols., "The Library of Christian Classics"; ed. John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV. 12. 11.

²⁵ cf Höpfl, p. 75 who is surprised.

²⁶ Institution (1536), p. 85; OS 1, 91.

²⁷ Instruction et confession de foy; OS 1, 400-401: "Nous avons desia veu la fontaine dont sort l'Eglise laquelle nous est icy proposee a croire a ceste fin que nous ayons confiance que tous les eleuz par le luyen de la foy sont conionctz en une Eglise et societe et en un peuple de Dieu, duquel Christ nostre Seigneur est le conducteur et prince et chief comme dun corps, ainsi que en luy ilz ont este eleuz devant la constitution du monde affin quilz feussent tous assemblez au royaume de Dieu." See "Appendix," #II.

Christians."²⁸ By 1543 and again in the 1559 Institutes, however, one is back to the phrase "all the elect." The position, maintained even here, that the multitude of Christians which is "assembled into one people" is so gathered because²⁹ they are part of God's own whom he "has eternally elected" in Christ,²⁹ indicates that the change in terms does not influence the content of his position. For the first time within the Institutes, the terms invisible and visible appear--Doumergue's mere change in terminology having been observed.³⁰ For the first time, as well, the description of the church as the "mother of us all" appears and the distinction between believe the church and believe in the church is made.³¹ Second, one notes that the invisible church tends to recede. This is again the common opinion.³² While it is true that the expansion in the chapter is one which focuses upon the visible church, it is also true that (in 1539) Calvin adds that "our Faith in the church is none the worse when it recognizes the Church that our intelligence cannot understand": that is, the church which consists of the elect who by the mercy of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit "have come into participation in Christ (and) are set apart for their proper Heritage from God."³³ In brief, although he does not expand on it, the church of the elect continues to be present and much stressed within the visible church.

Calvin's consideration of the church begins with the distinction between believe the church versus believe in the church. He next adds his definition of the church, referring to it as the multitude of the Christians, and compares it to a mother. In additional new material for the 1539 Institutes, he states that this church which must be recognized by faith includes a twofold recognition: first, that the church is "the number of the elect" and second, that there is a unity to the church outside of which there is no salvation. Next follows the 1536's comments on the church's being catholic, universal, and holy. To the

²⁸Institution de la religion chrestienne, 1541, ed. Jacques Pannier (4 vols., "Les Textes francais: oeuvres completes de Calvin"; Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1961), II, 121: "Premierement l'Eglise nous est icy proposée à croire, à fin que nous croyons (1536) toute la multitude des Chrestiens estre conjointe par le bien de Foy, et assemblée en un peuple, duquel le Seigneur Jesus soit Prince et Capitaine; mesme qu'elle est unye en un corps, duquel Christ est le Chef; comme Dieu a éternellement esleu tous les siens en iceluy, à fin de les assembler et recueillir, en son Regne." See "Appendix," #III.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., p. 127.

³¹Ibid., p. 120.

³²Whale, p. 152 and 153: "The ideal Church of the Elect now retires into the background, and Calvin concerns himself more and more with the Church in its empirical actuality, where holiness is potential rather than achieved, and is only in process of becoming."

³³Institution (1541), II, 127.

last is appended the comment that the church is not yet perfect. To the 1536's observation that since the beginning of the world the Lord has had his church, he now adds a new paragraph providing biblical evidence to that effect. This evidence is drawn from Psalms 89 and 132. From the former psalm Calvin lifts out the remark that God has ordained a covenant with his elect and has sworn to David his servant that he will eternally conserve his seed.³⁴ In this manner Calvin underlines, once again, the election basis of the church. The discussion of the "communion of the saints" is that found in the 1536 Institutes, now revised and expanded by new comments which stress the benefits brought by that communion, namely that we cannot be torn from Christ no matter how much we may be torn to pieces. Thus, he adds in 1539, such communion--which involves both union with Christ and fellowship with other Christians--is a source of comfort. He then advises, continuing to insert new material, that to believe the church means that we are to believe it when it is invisible as well as when it can be "seen by the eye and touched by the hand." This brings to a close his discussion of the invisible church.

He turns immediately and somewhat abruptly to the visible church. He introduces it merely by stating that "now it is time to speak of the visible church."³⁵ What then follows is a twenty page section upon the judgment of charity, the marks of the church, the ³⁶perfections of this church, excommunication, and other related topics.

There is an increased emphasis upon the visible church here, but one where it still clearly is anchored in divine election. The concern remains to trace out as much as possible the ramifications and manifestations of that election. Though there is a great emphasis upon the moral qualities of the church, there is still no clear mention of the sinews of polity which will subsequently serve to hold the church together and to serve increasingly to replace the elect community as the primary focus of attention. It still seems to be an overstatement to conclude with McDonnell that Calvin has moved from "an exclusive concern for the sanctification of the elect to a concern for the sanctification of the ecclesial body."³⁷ An even more inaccurate conclusion is that of Höpfl, that by 1539 Calvin has arrived at the position of making a distinction between visible and invisible but yet being "far from knowing what to do with it."³⁸ The result, Höpfl continues, is that as Calvin's thought came more and more to center upon the visible church, "the universal church, the communion of saints, continued to recede ineroxably from view, becoming at last (1559?) no more than a device for dealing with the Creeds' assertion of the one-ness of the church in such

³⁴ Ibid., p. 124.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 127-46.

³⁷ McDonnell, p. 156.

³⁸ Höpfl, p. 84.

a way as to wrest this weapon from the Romanists, or, on a more charitable reading, a theological datum capable of sustaining Calvin's evangelical ecumenism."³⁹ Hopfl seems to suggest that Calvin began with the concept of the invisible church, later found himself in a situation where he was dealing with visible churches and had no clear way to get from the one to the other.⁴⁰ It would appear to be more accurate to conclude that Calvin moved easily between the two as early as the 1536 Institutes, and that although drawn inevitably to stress the visible church more completely and precisely--because of his experience both in Strasbourg and Geneva--he did not fall into the trap of identifying the church with the ministry and the sacraments. Rather, until the end he stressed the role of election as the foundation of the church and regarded the "outward helps," mentioned at the beginning of Book IV of the 1559 Institutes as just that, "aids" whereby God provides for our weaknesses.

1542 Catechism of the Church of Geneva. That the church as the whole number of the elect and as a visible reality are to be held together, but with the priority going to the church as the elect, is repeated in Calvin's treatment of the Creed in the 1542 Catechism:

93. What is the catholic church?

It is the company of faithful that God has ordained and elected to eternal life.

96. In what sense do you call the Church holy?

In that those whom God has elected, he justifies and purifies to holiness and innocence (Rom. 8:29), so that his glory may be displayed in them.

100. And this Church, is it possible to know it otherwise than in believing it?

There is surely a visible church of God in terms of which he has given the signs of knowing it, but here (in speaking of believing the church) we are speaking more precisely of the company of those whom God has chosen in order to save them. This company cannot be plainly seen by the eye.

The first and fundamental affirmation of the Creed--to believe the church--clearly focuses still upon the invisible church, the whole number of the elect, for Calvin had already indicated that believe

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

⁴¹ Ioannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss (59 vols., "Corpus Reformationum," vols. 29-87; Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke and Son/M. Bruhn/, 1863-1900), VI, cols. 39-41. Hereafter cited as CO.

the church relates to the invisible church. In the 1536 Institutes he has said that faith is belief in things unseen. There is nothing to suggest that he ever backed away from insisting that "believe the church"--however unfelicitous a phrase--relates by faith to the church which he has just described as being "the company of those whom God has chosen in order to save them" and about whom it must be said that "this company cannot be plainly seen by the eye."

1534 Institutes. All of this suggests that when one comes to the discussion of the church in the 1543 Institutes one must not overweight the new emphasis Calvin places upon the visible church. It is true, as Strohl says, that in the chapter on the church (ch. 8) only about one-third of the material is on the invisible church and the remainder is an "immense treatise" on the visible church.⁴² It is likewise true that there appears here for the first time the articulation of the fourfold offices of the ministry and that there is a "positive ecclesiastical polity . . . cemented throughout with the sense of order and discipline."⁴³ It is no doubt true as well, that there emerges a "high Calvinist doctrine of the Ministry."⁴⁴ It may even be true, as Hopfl suggests, that while in one sense the term church is meant to suggest the totality of the elect, living and dead, it is with the second scriptural sense of the visible, external church that Calvin is "really" interested.⁴⁵ Finally, it is clear that the well-known definition of the invisible versus visible church--a definition which survives intact in IV.I.7 of the 1559 Institutes--first appears in 1543. Yet, two things should be noted about these two paragraphs on the invisible and the visible church respectively. First, the church is still initially defined as it has been from 1536: it is all the elect. Second, the admonition to honor the visible church and keep oneself in communion with it is not really new. It has its precedent in the true marks of the church as initially spelled out in the 1536 Institutes, for where those marks are found one should not separate himself from that church.

If anything, there is a tendency now to focus upon the visible church, not just as polity or as the theater of "aggressive clericalism" or as the locus of discipline, but as the elect.⁴⁶ Calvin has already indicated that if one partakes of Christ by faith there is no reason to doubt that one is among that whole number of the elect, and he had also stated earlier that there is no real purpose in believing the church as the elect unless one believes himself to be a part of it in Christ. Consequently, it is not the visible church which begins now to slip its moorings from the piling of the invisible but the invisible church.

⁴²Henri Strohl, "La Notion de l'église chez les réformateurs," Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse, XVI (1936), p. 308.

⁴³Whale, p. 155.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Hopfl, p. 104.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 103.

which comes to be more clearly anchored within the visible. Nonetheless, although there may be a growing tendency to view the visible church as the company of the elect, or at least as the true church in a more and more concrete sense, priority still remains with the invisible church of the elect. The 1543 Institutes does not seem to change this, for while it is "necessary for us to believe the Church which is invisible to us and known to God alone," we are, Calvin says, "commanded to hold this visible Church in honor and to keep ourselves in communion with it."⁴⁷

II

1559 Institutes. All of this is brought together in what has been called the "organized chaos"⁴⁸ of the first few sections of Book IV of the 1559 Institutes. Here, too, the ties between the invisible church and the visible church are close. Perhaps this is so, as Strohl observes, because Calvin was able by then to have observed numerous cases of authentic believers among the Genevan faithful and to see the effects of the living Word. Yet, he continues, "he has not actually identified the invisible Church with the visible Church, but has recognized more and more⁴⁹ that actual ties unite the visible Church to the invisible Church."⁴⁹ Accordingly, to profess to believe the church is now said to apply to the visible church, (Calvin's present topic in Book IV as contrasted to the topics of Book III) as well as to the invisible church.⁵⁰ But if the phrase "to believe the church" is now applied to the visible church as well, Calvin is quick to add that it also refers "to all God's elect, in whose number are also included the dead."⁵¹ Although these are by now old thoughts, this material is newly drafted for the 1559 Institutes. Therefore, the basic definition of the church as the elect has survived as, indeed, one would expect it to have done.

It will not be necessary to summarize the contents of these first few sections; the thematic content is now familiar. What I would like to stress is that there are added to this edition of the text certain insertions--what I have earlier called "grace notes"--which suggest both

⁴⁷ Citations of the 1543 Institutes are taken from the 1559 edition, IV.4.7; emphasis added. See "Appendix," #IV.

⁴⁸ John R. Loeschen, The Divine Community: Trinity, Church, and Ethics in Reformation Theologies ("Sixteenth Century Texts and Studies," vol. I; Kirksville, Mo: The Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1981), p. 160.

⁴⁹ Strohl, p. 312.

⁵⁰ IV.1.2. Quotations from the 1559 Institutes are rendered from L'Institution chrétienne, 1560 (3 vols., ed. P. Marcel and J. Cadier; [Geneva?]: Editions Kerygma et Editions Farel, 1978). See "Appendix," #V.

⁵¹ Ibid.

a renewed non-Genevan emphasis and an underlining of an earlier concern. When Calvin speaks of God's drawing his elect through inner calling (IV.1.2), when he refers to them as a "handful of people," and when he indicates that we must "leave entirely to God the privilege of knowing his Church, of which the foundation is his eternal election," he is summarizing well-known themes, but, interestingly, he brackets them by allusions to a current situation which by 1559 could hardly be that of Geneva. At the beginning he asserts that

although the Devil does all he can to ruin the grace of Christ and although all the enemies of God conspire in this effort and throw themselves into it with an impetuous rage, we ought to know that this grace cannot ever be snuffed out, and that the blood of Jesus Christ cannot be rendered sterile so that it produces no fruit.

This, I suggest, is hardly an apt comment about Geneva in 1559. The passage ends as follows:

although the horrible desolation--which one sees everywhere and on all sides--seems to indicate that nothing at all remains of the Church, let us know that the death of Christ is fruitful and that God miraculously protects his Church, as though it were a hiding-place and as he said to Elijah, in his times, 'I have reserved for myself seven-thousand men who have not bent the knee before Baal' (I Kings 19:18).

Here, too, the ideas and some of the terms go back to 1536, but these brackets on each end of this part of IV.1.2 are newly drafted material for this 1559 edition of the Institutes. What they suggest is interesting. First, in discussing the church, Calvin has again felt it necessary to place its life in the context of suffering and persecution. This constitutes an insertion which reminds the reader--and perhaps Calvin as well--that there is a non-Genevan church which, whether in France or elsewhere, continues to live much as it did when he wrote the first edition of the Institutes. It is to this church, which begins and ends in suffering, that it is particularly important to point out that election is the foundation of God's church. Indeed, Calvin never ceased to point out to those who were in prison, that the reality of the church was not attached to the visible church.⁵² In this connection, Cadier mentions the account of the martyrs of Lyon. When they learned in their prison that at that very time there was a debate going on in Geneva about the doctrine of eternal election, they feared that this venerable doctrine would be rejected and that there would be taken away from them the sole thought which enabled them to endure their persecution.⁵³ This church, which suffers and which finds comfort in the belief that the church is the whole number of the elect, is the same one Calvin

⁵² Jean-Daniel Benoit, Calvin directeur d'âmes: contribution à l'histoire de la piété réformée (Strasbourg: Oberlin, 1947), p. 197.

⁵³ Jean Cadier, "Election et l'église," De l'élection éternelle de Dieu: Actes du Congrès international de théologie calviniste, Genève 15-18 juin 1936. ed. Jacques Courvoisier et al (Geneva: Editions Labor, 1946), p. 281.

addressed in the 1536 Institutes. As Niesel has indicated, it is a church which may be limited to house churches, but it is a church which is marvelously sustained by God in its hiddenness; it is a church which God protects with his power apart from human aid; it is a church which He upholds even when the whole world is perishing; it is a church which can be wonderfully preserved even though it is no longer visible but in a tomb.⁵⁴ It is, in short, a church which is invincible and indestructible because its foundation is election.

Second, although the heightened emphasis upon the visible church-- which we have seen developing from 1536 until the final edition of the Institutes and which culminates in the fourfold ministry first mentioned in the 1543 edition--is not removed from this edition, there does seem to be a pulling back from going too far in identifying the elect with the visible church and a recasting of the context of the discussion of the church in terms which repristinate the early period's emphases upon the church in its hidden qualities. Consequently, alongside Strohl's judgment that there are close ties between the invisible and visible church, one must add that there is also brought forward the old emphasis, upon the church as hidden and persecuted and upon the clear statements that the visible church consists of external aids or "outward helps to beget and increase faith within us."⁵⁵ For its existence it is not dependent upon these but only upon God's election, although ordinarily he operates through one or more of the marks of the true church. Indeed, by God's provision the visible church is the means by which God ordinarily brings the elect to their salvation.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, when Calvin states that outside the church there is no salvation, properly speaking he means not outside the visible church but outside the church of the elect. Beyond Geneva it is still important to speak of the church as the whole number of God's elect, invisible, hidden, suffering, and known only to him. Yet for all this emphasis, the Gallican Confession of the same year, the draft of which Calvin had reviewed, speaks only of the visible church.⁵⁷ How does one explain this? Perhaps it is accounted for by acknowledging that this confession's concern is primarily with visible churches and parishes. In addition, it should be remembered that Calvin does not always feel the need to have things stated only his way.

III

It is now perhaps abundantly clear that election is the foundation of the church. At least that is what Calvin says when he discusses the doctrine of the church. Admittedly, we have spent most of our time in examining the ecclesiological setting of the doctrine of election as it is found in the various editions of the Institutes. But does Calvin

⁵⁴ Wilhelm Niesel, The Theology of Calvin, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 208.

⁵⁵ IV.1.1.

⁵⁶ cf. Eric C. Jay, The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), p. 170.

⁵⁷ OS II, 319-20, pp. 21-29.

connect election with the Church when he speaks about it in a more directly soteriological context or does he focus upon individual election to the exclusion of the churchly dimension? The place to look is in Book III, 21-23. After pointing out, in the first part of II, 21.1, that there are three benefits to be gained from considering the doctrine of election--an awareness of God's mercy, an emphasis upon his glory, and a conviction of true humility--he states that individuals who do not know themselves to be part of God's own particular people are perpetually miserable and uncertain. Here is the individual focus which one has come to identify with Calvin's doctrine of some elected and some rejected. But he then relates this individual election, which is the source of these three benefits and the individual's salvation, to the church:

It is also true that it is from this [election] that the Church comes before us (nous vient en avant), which St. Bernard so aptly says, would neither be found nor known among creatures, since that in an admirable manner it is hidden in the bosom of blessed⁵⁸ predestination and under the mass of the unhappy damnation of men.

This is new material prepared for the 1559 Institutes. Thus, the conclusion that Calvin continues to stress election as the foundation of the church cannot be attributed to making too much out of certain leftover ingredients from earlier discussions of election in the context of the Creed. Rather, the individual and churchly dimensions of election are tied together in a manner which is not necessary in Book III, except that Book III portrays not the individual Christian's life so much as the inner life of the church. Therefore, so far as Calvin's doctrine of election is soteriological it is also ecclesiological and so far as it is ecclesiological it is also soteriological.

Lest one be accused of depending too much upon the Institutes, one reference from a sermon will indicate that Calvin's position--that the church has its foundation in election--is not one which was reserved for his more "systematic" writing. It was preached as well. In a 1560 sermon on Jacob and Esau, Calvin comments on the general election of Abraham and then on the choosing of Jacob. He notes that it is from the line of Jacob that will come those who will be saved. Then he observes that the phenomenon of general and special election⁵⁹ indicates that the source and origin of the church is God's election. As is frequently the case in his sermons, he does not develop this thought but passes on to other matters. The point is that as late as 1560, and that in a soteriological context, he mentions that election is the foundation of the church. From beginning to end, the church has remained more than what it ordinarily appears to be.

⁵⁸ III.21.1; see also IV.1.2.

⁵⁹ CO 58.38: "l'eglise procede de la pure grace de Dieu."

IV

There is a certain "tense synthesis"⁶⁰ in Calvin's doctrine of the church as the elect. It has not necessarily been a good thing that he chose to explicate it in terms of the Augustinian concepts of the visible and invisible church. The model of general and special election might have served him at least as well and perhaps better. At a minimum the language of general and special election enables one to insist more believably that those who are part of the general election are truly part of the church and have special tasks and responsibilities which pertain to that kind of election. But given the historical situation out of which Calvin initially wrote and in terms of which he thought through his understanding of the church, it no doubt made more sense to him to approach the problem from the widely known model of visible/invisible. This enabled him to fend off the romanists on the right and the anabaptists on the left. It permitted him also to believe that God's church continued to exist even under the most desperate conditions. It also made it possible later, under the rubric of the mixed church, to justify the woeful progress made by some of the evangelical churches. They, too, despite their lack of discipline and holiness, were also to be continued to be regarded as true churches.

The church owed its existence to the act of God. That is the point Calvin is making. But using the model of visible/invisible did sometimes give the impression that there were two churches. When he speaks of the true visible church, he speaks of it in terms of the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. But when he speaks of the true invisible church he speaks of the numerous electorum.⁶¹ There are, of course, not two churches for Calvin, but only one--it is within the true visible church in ordinary circumstances--just as there is a special election to salvation within the general election.

Calvin's tendency, all have noted, is to move toward equating the visible church--such as fully formed in Geneva--with the elect. In the end, however, it appears that he draws back from some of the implications of this heightened clerical orientation to affirm again the hidden nature of the church, especially where the situation is difficult. It is as though the optimism reflected in the 1543 Institutes' position had become tempered by the years of practical experience in Geneva. In any case, he ends as he had begun, by stressing the hidden quality of the church.

Whatever the difficulties in Calvin's position, there are benefits in viewing the church as the elect. We have mentioned one of them more than once. The church conceived as the elect is a source of comfort for those who are isolated and persecuted. To be surrounded by a cloud of

⁶⁰Whale, p. 152.

⁶¹Werner Krusche, Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin ("Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte," vol. VIII; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1957), p. 315.

witnesses--whether in the sixteenth or twentieth centuries--and to believe that one is among that victorious company is surely a note which might advantageously be sounded today, particularly when one tends to speak of the church almost exclusively in terms of institutional forms and polity. The church as the elect is a biblical emphasis which tends to come forward in the worst of times, for it reflects--when strongly felt--the minority status of those who hold it. As Calvin moves from being an outsider to becoming a new insider, he may momentarily have forgotten those who were still on the outside, preoccupied as he was with the problems of wresting the church in Geneva free, now not from papal control, but from civil authority. Fortunately, he returns to this clear biblical emphasis in the end. Perhaps it might be worthwhile for us to look again at Calvin on this subject, for many Christians around the world today would not find their situation to be drastically different from that which Calvin lived through in his own times.

To be sure, there are other benefits to Calvin's concept of the church as the elect. It provides the backdrop for a serious attempt at discipline, since high purpose and significant results are to be expected of the elect, some of whom are found to be in any church where there is true preaching and the sacraments rightly administered. It places that discipline (including excommunication) in its proper, penultimate context. The church as the elect suggests a church where sed semper reformanda is applicable since no relative institutional forms ought to be absolutized. By virtue of the judgment of charity, it leads to the establishment of peace within a given church and creates a church open to other churches, since the unity among the churches lies in divine election and that election's binding one to Christ as to one body together. It is one component, then, for undergirding the ecumenical movement's effort at cooperation and union. And the church as the elect places the emphasis where it should be, upon God and the people of God, which, as tempting as it might be to identify that people either with faith or with order, is finally known only to God and is not to be equated with any form of church structure, political government, or economic philosophy. But although all these are beneficial elements of the doctrine of the church as the elect, it does appear that as the chief emphasis in the doctrine of election is the comfort and assurance it provides the individual believer, so in the doctrine of the church the strong note of consolation provided those who suffer is the chief benefit for our times.

Unless I am mistaken, the problem of faithfully relating the biblical witness to human suffering has been this century's most compelling theological challenge. That it can be addressed individually in Christ is true enough. Many have endured their torments by clinging to Him. But the church is not an aggregate of individuals; it is, as Calvin says, a people of God, the whole number of the elect. It is a communion of saints, which, like the prisoners of Lyon, may find strength and comfort in the firm conviction that they together will be victorious, even though the world around them tumble and run red with their blood.

If one reads Calvin solely in terms of Geneva, then one may also have to read him almost exclusively in terms of a theology of glory and, in turn, ruminate upon the unfortunate connections between Calvin and a

"certain" theology of glory which has strongly influenced the American self-understanding. But if one can learn how to read him in terms of the first generation concerns of the evangelical party in France and its poor, little, suffering churches which lived under the cross, then, perhaps, something of his theology of the cross may yet speak powerfully to that part of the world which, even today, strongly resembles his native land as he knew it and which shortly will include within its domains the greater number of those who call themselves Christians.

APPENDIX

Calvin's Definitions of the Church (involving election).

I. 1536 Institutes

I believe the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, eternal life.

21. First, we believe the holy catholic church -- that is the whole number of the elect, whether angels or men [Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:16]; of men, whether dead or still living; of the living, in whatever lands they live, or wherever among the nations they have been scattered--to be one church and society, and one people of God. Of it, Christ, our Lord, is Leader and Ruler, and as it were Head of the one body, according as, through divine goodness, they have been chosen in him before the foundation of the world [Eph. 1:4], in order that all might be gathered into God's Kingdom.

Now this society is catholic, that is, universal, because there could not be two or three churches. But all God's elect are so united and conjoined in Christ [cf. Eph. 1:22-23] that, [138] as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together [cf. Eph. 4:16] as are the limbs of one body [Rom 12:5; I Cor. 10:17; 12:12, 27]. These are made truly one who (73) live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God, called to the inheritance of eternal life.

It is also holy, because as many as have been chosen by God's eternal providence to be adopted as members of the church -- all these are made holy by the Lord [John 17:17-19; Eph. 5:25-32].
Institution (1536), pp. 78-79.

II. 1537 Instruction in Faith

I believe the holy Church universal, the communion of saints.

We have already seen the fountain from which the Church springs. The Church is here set forth to us as object of faith to this end that we may have confidence that all the elect are conjoined through the bond of faith in one Church and society, in one people of God, of which Christ our Lord is the leader and prince and head, as of one body, so that in him they have been elected before the constitution of the world to the end that they may be all assembled in the kingdom of God. This society is catholic, that is to say, universal, because there are not two or three Churches, but all God's elect are united and conjoined in Christ in such a way that just as they depend on one head so they grow as in one body, adhering one to the other, being composed as the members of one same body, being truly made one in as much as they live by the same spirit of God in one same faith, hope, and charity, being called to participate in one same inheritance of

eternal life. Moreover, the Church is also holy, because all those who are elected by the eternal providence of God to be adopted as members of the Church are all sanctified by the Lord through spiritual regeneration. Instruction in Faith, trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), pp. 52-53.

III. 1541 Institutes

First, it is proposed [by this article of the Creed] to believe the Church in order that we believe all the multitude of Christians to be conjoined, by the benefit of Faith, and assembled into one people, of which the Lord Jesus is Prince and Captain--even that the Church is united in one body, of which Christ is the Head--as God has eternally elected all his own in Him, in order to assemble and gather them together in his Kingdom.

* * * * *

Finally, to keep ourselves in the unity of this Church, it is never necessary that we see a Church with the eye nor touch it with the hand. Rather, given that we must believe it [the Church] so we are told that we ought to no less recognize it when it is invisible to us than if we see it clearly. And our Faith in the Church is none the worse when it recognizes the Church that our intelligence cannot understand. . . .

Now it is time to speak of the visible Church, and what we can understand of it by our sense, in order to demonstrate what opinion we ought to have of it. For the Lord has marked his Church for us with certain marks and signs insofar as we are able to recognize it. Institution de la religion Chrestienne, II, pp. 121, 126-7. Trans. by David N. Wiley.

IV. 1543 Institutes (IV.4.7 of 1559)

We have said that Holy Scripture speaks of the Church in two fashions. Sometimes in using this term [church] it intends the Church such as she is in truth and in which are found only those who by the grace of adoption are children of God and, by the sanctification of his Spirit, are true members of Jesus Christ. Moreover, in Scripture this applies not only to those saints who live on the earth but to all the elect from the beginning of the world.

Often, on the other hand, by the name Church Scripture indicates the whole multitude of men who, being dispersed in the diverse regions of the world, makes the same confession of honoring God and Jesus Christ, has baptism as the witness of its faith, and in participating in the Supper affirms its unity in doctrine and charity. This multitude consents to the Word of God and wishes to maintain preaching, following the commandment of Jesus Christ. In this [latter] Church hypocrites, who have nothing of Jesus Christ except title and appearance, are mixed in with the good: some are ambitious, others greedy, others still are evil speakers; certain live a dissolute life. These are tolerated for a time either

because one is not able to convict them officially or because discipline is not always so vigorous as it ought to be. Therefore, as it is necessary for us to believe the Church which is invisible to us and known to God alone so also we are commanded to hold this visible Church in honor and to keep ourselves in communion with it. L'Institution chretienne, 1560, III, p. 20. Trans. David N. Wiley.

V. 1559 Institutes (IV.1.2)

[e] Although the Devil does all he can to ruin the grace of Christ and although all the enemies of God conspire in this effort and throw themselves into it with an impetuous rage, we ought to know that this grace cannot ever be snuffed out, and that the blood of Jesus Christ cannot be rendered sterile so that it produces no fruit. [e(b/a)] In this context we must consider the election of God and also His inner calling by which he draws his elect, for he alone knows those who are his own and holds them, as Paul says, under his seal. . . . But because these [the elect] are only a handful of people, even despised, mixed in among a great multitude, and are hidden as a pinch of grain under a great pile of chaff, we must leave entirely to God the privilege of knowing his Church, of which the foundation is his eternal election. [e(b)] Yet, it would never be sufficient to conceive in our minds that God has his elect if we would not, at the same time, understand there to be a unity of the Church, and this to such a degree that we are persuaded that we are truly grafted into it. Because if we are not tied to all the other members under the common Head, who is Jesus Christ, we are unable to have any hope of the heritage to come.

[a] For this reason [the above unity in Christ] the Church is called catholic or universal, because one would not know how to make of it two or three churches [e] without tearing Jesus Christ apart (to the degree which we might be able to do so). [a] The elect of God are so very joined together in Jesus Christ that, as they all depend on one Head, so also are they made into one body--through the same sort of liaison as one sees between the members of the human body. They are, therefore, all one, living from the same faith, hope, and charity through the Spirit of God. [b(a)] They are called not only to the same heritage but also to participate in the glory of God and of Jesus Christ. [e] Consequently, although the horrible desolation--which one sees everywhere and on all sides--seems to indicate that nothing at all remains of the Church, let us know that the death of Christ is fruitful and that God miraculously protects his Church, as though it were a hiding-place and as he said to Elijah, in his times, "I have reserved for myself seven-thousand men who have not bent the knee before Baal" (I Kings 19:18). Ibid., p. 12.

[e] = 1559

[b] = 1539

[a] = 1536