

CALVIN'S TEACHING ON THE ELDER  
ILLUMINATED BY EXEGETICAL HISTORY

by  
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It is well known that the Protestant Reformation was marked by a great concern for the authority of scripture. Christians have always regarded the Bible as authoritative, but there has not been complete agreement on the things for which scripture is normative, and how to apply biblical injunctions or examples to contemporary Christian life. For all Protestants, the Bible was the sole authority for doctrine. However, different groups of reformers extended or interpreted the role of sola scriptura in various ways. For Lutherans, "scripture alone" meant that what is not opposed to biblical practice is acceptable for church order; liturgy and ecclesiastical polity are derived from doctrines and historical practice, not directly from scripture. For "Radicals" or "Anabaptists," on the other end of the spectrum, the Bible, especially the New Testament, was the model for every detail of Christian life. For the Reformed tradition, Zwinglian as well as Calvinist, scripture provided a guide to the right ordering of the church, worship, discipline, and the ministry.

John Calvin aimed above all to be faithful to scripture. The Institutes of the Christian Religion was written as a key to help people understand the Bible; it was intended to be a companion to the many commentaries the reformer published over the course of the years. Remembering this close relationship between the two kinds of works, and, above all, the fact that Calvin wanted to say only what he believed the Bible taught, it is fascinating to investigate how his exegesis molded his theology and his theology shaped his exegesis. In the present paper the topic is the office of elder, and the object is to show what Calvin could have found in the commentators who preceded him, and what and how he contributed to this exegesis to present a coherent picture of biblical church order.

The focus here is New Testament texts John Calvin cites in his "systematic" Institutes of the Christian Religion to establish the office of the elder of discipline as a biblical and necessary part of proper church order. The office of elder is predicated on the agreement that discipline is an essential part of church life, and thus the major text supporting discipline, Matt. 18:15-18, must be mentioned as well as the three verses, I Cor. 12:28, Rom. 12:8, and I Tim. 5:17, which serve as the biblical bases for the agent of discipline, the elder. There is no doubt that Calvin shaped the interpretation of these passages, as have other theologians, but what is fascinating is to discover how much of his material may be found in the preceding exegetical tradition, both medieval and Protestant. Calvin's genius lay in the architectonic coherence of the way he fitted texts together

much more than in any invention of new meanings unknown to his predecessors. With what is, I suspect, an innate perversity, I was enchanted to find that what twentieth-century writers consider shocking about Calvin's exegesis was old hat to his contemporaries, and what shocked many of his contemporaries is often taken for granted by twentieth-century Christians. It is fun to break stereotypes! But back to the story.

In half an hour it is practically impossible even to sketch the whole, much less to give details, so please allow for the fact that this is quite condensed. A full discussion of this subject will be appearing in book form in a couple of months.<sup>1</sup> After some introductory comments on the question of discipline in sixteenth-century theology, I will touch on the first two texts which Calvin considered normative for the elder. Then I will sketch part only of the history for the third pericope, I Tim. 5:17-18, because this particular case struck me as one of the most entertaining examples of the breaking of stereotypes.

As all of you know, elders are one of the four ecclesiastical ministers in Calvin's complete system. The other three are pastors, teachers, and deacons. Pastors, elders, and teachers are called presbyters. Presbyterian responsibilities include preaching and teaching, administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline; deacons are charged with social concerns and the care of the poor and the sick. Pastors have all the presbyterial duties, but teachers and elders have only specific ones. Teacher-presbyters teach but do not administer the sacraments or discipline; elder-presbyters exercise discipline but do not preach or administer the sacraments. One of the critical points here is the fact that two of Calvin's four offices, the eldership and the diaconate, are so-called "lay" ministries. The social concerns and charity handled by the deacons were separate though subordinate, while the disciplinary duties of the elders were shared with the pastors.<sup>2</sup>

All Christian communities in the period we are considering agreed that moral oversight, discipline, is a necessary part of church order, and all based this idea on Matt. 18:15-18, especially verse seventeen, which commits reproof to "the church," if the sinner does not heed the rebuke of two or three.<sup>3</sup> However, there was not full agreement on who constituted the "church" for the purposes of discipline. For the patristic and medieval tradition, at least from the time of John Chrysostom, the "church" here is almost always equivalent to the clergy. For Protestants, "church" had to include "laity," but different groups of Protestants had different ideas about how to identify the laity in question. Some Anabaptists and a few Calvinist Reformed, such as Jean Morely, regarded the "church" in Matt. 18:17 as equivalent to the whole body of faithful, though they sometimes inconsistently excluded women. Most Protestants, however, believed the "church" could and should be represented by the leading lay (men,

of course), along with the pastors. But who were the leading laymen? Were they the Christian magistrates, as Lutherans and Zwinglians thought? Or were they in principle distinct from the Christian political authorities, as Calvinists insisted? The ramifications of this last issue are beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is important to note that a restriction of the authority for ecclesiastical discipline was a tradition not only in historical practice but also in the exegesis of the biblical text, Matt. 18:17. This near-consensus on the interpretation of Matt. 18:17 provides the context for the way Calvin used the exegetical traditions of Rom. 12:8, I Cor. 12:28, and I Tim. 5:17; his object was to find biblical clarification for the agents of ecclesiastical discipline inferred from Matthew.

It is useful to quote first Calvin's definition of the office of elder, which is elaborated in the third edition of the Institutes in 1543, located in IV.3.8 in the final version.

Governors [I Cor. 12:28] were, I believe, elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the censure of morals and the exercise of discipline along with the bishops. For one cannot otherwise interpret his statement, "Let him who rules act with diligence" [Rom. 12:8, cf. Vg.]. Each church, therefore, had from its beginning a senate, chosen from godly, grave, and holy men, which had jurisdiction over the correcting of faults. Of it we shall speak later. Now experience itself makes clear that this sort of order was not confined to one age. Therefore, this office of government is necessary for all ages.

The cross reference here leads the reader to another passage added to the same edition of the Institutes, in IV.11.1.

There remains the third part of ecclesiastical power, the most important in a well-ordered state. This, as we have said, consists in jurisdiction. But the whole jurisdiction of the church pertains to the discipline of morals, which we shall soon discuss. For as no city or township can function without magistrate and polity, so the church of God . . . needs a spiritual polity. This is, however, quite distinct from the civil polity, yet does not hinder or threaten it but rather greatly helps and furthers it. Therefore, this power of jurisdiction will be nothing, in short, but an order framed for the preservation of the spiritual polity.

For this purpose courts of judgment were established in the church from the beginning to deal with the censure of morals, to investigate vices, and to be charged with the exercise of the office of the keys. Paul designates this order in his letter to the Corinthians when he men-

tions offices of ruling [I Cor. 12:28]. Likewise, in Romans, when he says, "Let him who rules, rule with diligence" [Rom. 12:8 p.]. For he is not addressing magistrates (not any of whom were then Christians), but those who were joined with the pastors in the spiritual rule of the church. In the letter to Timothy, also, he distinguishes two kinds of presbyters: those who labor in the Word, and those who do not carry on the preaching of the Word yet rule well [I Tim. 5:17]. By this latter sort he doubtless means those who were appointed to supervise morals and to use the whole power of the keys.

This second and longer passage gathers all three of the verses Calvin considered normative for the office of elders.

The primary biblical texts for the Calvinist Reformed office of discipline are I Cor. 12:28 and Rom. 12:8. In I Cor. 12:28 it says: "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments [*κυβερνήσεις*, gubernationes], divers kinds of tongues."<sup>6</sup> This history of the interpretation of the *κυβερνήσεις*, the gubernationes, in I Cor. 12:28 readily lent itself to Calvin's purpose, since tradition understood these gubernationes as ecclesiastical rulers, whose task included the function of discipline. Occasionally rule here was interpreted generically, without either ecclesiastical or secular connotation. Early Protestants unanimously rejected the idea of clerical dominance and some, especially Zwinglians, explicitly affirmed that gubernatores were people who assisted the bishops in ruling the church. Implied though not yet stated was the idea that these assistants were the Christian magistrates. All Calvin had to do was insist that these assistants were lay elders, not necessarily princes, though in practice he believed Christian magistrates might appropriately be elected as elders. What Calvin adds to the content of the common Protestant interpretation is therefore quite little. His insistence on the theoretical distinction between princes and elders, however, has an enormous significance for the church's teaching on ecclesiastical-civil relationships.

The exegetical tradition of Rom. 12:8 is more controversial. The text is part of a pericope, Rom. 12:6-8: "And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, [let us prophesy] according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, [let us give ourselves] to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting; he that giveth, [let him do it] with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness."<sup>7</sup> Though it seems strange to us, in the generation preceding Calvin this passage was often seen as a list of special offices, especially ecclesiastical offices. Even earlier, though, the individual names had frequently been associated with

various offices. For example, "those who prophesy or exhort or teach or minister" were often identified with different members of the clergy. "Those who preside" were often read as bishops or princes, with disciplinary responsibilities if they were bishops. Again, as in the case of I Cor. 12:28, early Protestants modified this idea slightly. Zwinglians followed the tradition that these rulers were princes, but they read Rom. 12:8 through the lens of the Old Testament model in 2 Chron. 19:6, where King Jehoshaphat appointed priests and judges. Thus Zwinglians made these civil princes of Rom. 12:8 rulers in the church. What Calvin did was to insist that princes did not have the same role in the New Testament era as in the Old, and thus "those who preside" are only accidentally, not necessarily, Christian magistrates. More cannot be said about this argument here. Suffice it to say that there is no doubt that Calvin developed the exegesis of these passages, but it is not fundamentally in the content that he innovated.

Characteristically, Calvin's chief contribution to the exegetical bases for the doctrine of the eldership lies in his use of the tradition he inherited, specifically in the linking of Rom. 12:8 and I Cor. 12:28, and in the interpretation of one by the other and both in relationship to Matt. 18:17. In general the Genevan reformer's interpretation of Rom. 12:8 and I Cor. 12:28 as evidence of a New Testament office of discipline was not particularly surprising to contemporaries--at least as exegesis; the idea of applying it consistently was something else. However, Calvin needed some biblical evidence for the overwhelming Protestant conviction that discipline cannot be left solely to the clergy, and for his insistence (in opposition to the Zwinglians) that these lay Christians involved in moral oversight should not in principle be identified with the Christian political authorities in the New Testament era.

The biblical answer to Calvin's problems was found in a development of the existing exegetical tradition of I Tim. 5:17-18. The text of this pericope reads as follows: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and 'The laborer deserves his wages.'"<sup>8</sup> According to Calvin, this passage describes two kinds of presbyters. Both are clearly ecclesiastical, not civil offices, and the distinction between the two by which one kind of presbyter preaches as well as rules and the other kind only rules explains how pastors and elders differ. Modern critics, of course, usually regard I Tim. 5:17 as referring to one kind of presbyter, more or less equivalent to the pastor, and castigate Calvin for inventing a double presbyterate to create legitimation for his elders.

Not all of tradition, however, would agree with the late twentieth century. Major voices in the Latin Middle Ages, such

as Thomas Aquinas, read the task of the presbyter as ruling; there is no mention of preaching. It is probable that the verb praeesse played a significant role in this emphasis on the governing function. Nicolas of Lyra explains the presbyter's work as liturgical, the divine office, the Mass. In late medieval commentaries there is little reference to preaching, perhaps because it was not expected that all priests would be able to preach. In fact, I Tim. 5:17 became a focus of polemic in the sixteenth century when Protestants used it to attack Roman clergy for not preaching. The assumptions of late medieval and early modern Roman Catholic thought are clear in the commentary of the humanist exegete, Thomas de Vio Cardinal Cajetan, who explains that some presbyters (only) rule, while others preach as well. That is, some bishops or priests might only administer discipline and read the Mass, and not preach, while others might do all three. This traditional interpretation of two kinds of presbyters is in fact taken up by some Anglican prelates such as Archbishop John Whitgift in controversy with the Calvinist proto-puritan Thomas Cartwright. Early Protestants might object to priests who could not preach, but they also often read this passage as speaking of two kinds of church leaders, preachers and deacons of poor relief, i.e., ministers of the Word and another kind of non-preaching presbyter. Obviously, therefore, seeing I Tim. 5:17 as describing two kinds of presbyters did not in the least shock the sixteenth century. Calvin was not innovating, much less inventing, the idea that this pericope speaks of two kinds of ecclesiastical presbyters.

What was most shocking to many of his contemporaries, however, was the fact that the Genevan reformer considered the second sort of presbyter a layman, not a priest. This is the only real difference between Calvin and Cajetan, between Whitgift and Cartwright, but it is a significant one. In essence, both sides of the dispute were influenced fundamentally by theological views of the sacred and profane, and in each case exegesis is determined by convictions about the ecclesiastical roles possible for lay Christians. According to sixteenth-century Roman Catholics and some Anglicans, ecclesiastical discipline is the prerogative of the clergy alone, according to most Protestants, ecclesiastical discipline is properly the role of the church as such, including the laity, whether as a whole or through chosen representatives. Thus far Calvin is a typical Protestant, insisting on the priesthood of believers.

There was, though, another dimension to the argument, a disagreement among Protestants on the character of the lay elders. Many Protestants who affirmed lay participation in discipline wanted to assign this role to Christian princes, often explicitly on the Old Testament model of 2 Chron. 19:6. Calvin differed from these Lutherans and especially Zwinglians in insisting that the laity involved in discipline cannot in principle be identified with civil rulers because the New Testament has a

different polity from the Old. For this reason I Tim. 5:17 was helpful to Calvin, because unlike the more ambiguous gubernationes and "ones who preside" in Corinthians and Romans, the presbyters had no traditional connection with civil rulers. Naturally presbyters are ecclesiastical leaders, not secular ones. Additionally, it was natural to see that those who labor in the Word and teaching are different from those who do not. Both kinds of presbyters rule in the church; both are agents of the discipline given to the "church" in Matthew. We see, then, that Calvin's use of I Tim. 5:17 offers a very ingenious way of "proving" a lay ministry of discipline distinct from both pastors and civil political authorities. The persuasiveness of this interpretation is seen in the way many exegetes, even some outside the Reformed tradition, adopted Calvin's explanation even when it did not fit their own ecclesiastical polity.

This may not be the place to discuss whether Calvin and the whole pre-critical tradition were reading into I Tim. 5:17 what they wanted to find rather than doing proper exegesis, though it is salutary to realize how much even the best of commentators are bound by the limitations of their times. What can be noted is the way our perspective on sixteenth-century Protestant use of sola scriptura in constructing theology is revised and refined by acquaintance with the whole sweep of exegetical history. We can more accurately assess the "biblical orthodoxy," and more fairly judge innovations, when the work of someone like Calvin is seen in context. In the case of I Tim. 5:17, the double presbyterate for which Calvin is castigated was in fact a very traditional, even orthodox idea. What shocked some of Calvin's contemporaries was the identification of the second sort of presbyter who exercised discipline as a layman. Those who were not shocked by this lay ministry were often distressed that Calvin wanted to distinguish these laymen from the civil authorities. Besides pointing up the influence of exegetical tradition, another thing this investigation illustrates is the role of theology in shaping exegesis. The little Calvin added to the exegetical content of his chosen texts corresponds almost exactly with two of the most distinctive points of Calvinist theology: the emphasis on lay leadership in the church, and the insistence on ecclesiastical autonomy. The most original thing about the Genevan reformer's constructive exegetical work, though, is his theological use of the interpretation of the biblical texts, the effort he made to coordinate these verses to form a coherent whole. Calvin's purpose was to draw out of scripture, the only authority for Christian life, its permanently valid pattern of church order. He did this by explaining coherently, to the satisfaction of many subsequent Protestants if not the twentieth century, who are the agents of discipline who represent the church in Matt. 18:17.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Elsie Anne McKee, Elders and the Plural Ministry: The Role of Exegetical History in Illuminating John Calvin's Theology (Geneva: Librarie Droz, 1988). (Hereafter cited as Elders and the Plural Ministry.)

<sup>2</sup>There are a number of studies of Calvin's teaching on the ministry. The ministry is treated in the usual discussions of the church, such as that by Benjamin C. Milner, Calvin's Doctrine of the Church (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970). A useful monograph by a Roman Catholic is Kilian McDonnell, John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). For the teacher, the standard monograph is Robert Henderson, The Teaching Office in the Reformed Tradition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962). For the deacon, see Elsie Anne McKee, John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving (Geneva: Librarie Droz, 1984), which also treats the exegetical histories of the biblical passages on which Calvin bases this office. The functioning of Calvin's consistory has been of interest to many, most of whom treat it in the context of ecclesiastical-civil relationships. The various articles of Robert M. Kingdon are outstanding. See for example "The Control of Morals in Calvin's Geneva," The Social History of the Reformation, ed. L. P. Zuck and J. W. Zophy (Ohio State Press, 1972), 3-16, and "The Control of Morals by the Earliest Calvinists," Renaissance, Reformation, Resurgence, ed. P. de Klerk (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1976), 95-106.

<sup>3</sup>See McKee, Elders and the Plural Ministry, chap. 1, pp. 34ff.

<sup>4</sup>John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1061. (Hereafter Institutes.) Ioanni Calvini Opera Selecta, ed. P. Barth et al. (Monarchii in Aedibus: Chr. Kaiser, 1926-52), 5:50, lines 21-28. (Hereafter Opera Selecta.)

<sup>5</sup>John Calvin, Institutes, pp. 1211-1212. Opera Selecta, 5:195, lines 3-8, 9-26.

<sup>6</sup>McKee, Elders and the Plural Ministry, chap. 3 and 8. All footnote apparatus, including the biblical references which are quoted from Calvin's commentaries, is found in this book.

<sup>7</sup>McKee, Elders and the Plural Ministry, chap. 2 and 8.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, chap. 4.

<sup>9</sup>See for example the comments of T. F. Torrance, "The Eldership in the Reformed Church," Scottish Journal of Theology



(1984): 502-518. Prof. Charles Carlston, my colleague in New Testament studies at Andover Newton Theological School, remarked that in fact the overall effect of the pastoral epistles is indeed to emphasize the governing rather than the preaching function of the presbyter, which would support the pre-critical tendency to read the presbyterial office as emphasizing ruling as much as or even more than preaching. Calvin's sensitivity to the larger picture in scripture makes his commentaries and Institutes a source of continuing profit even in a post-critical age.