

Calvin's Marks of the Church: A Call for Recovery

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Abstract

As a reformer, Calvin struggled with the issue of the oneness of the church. If the church was no longer visibly one, two issues came to the fore. First, how and in what respect the churches of the Reformation could maintain the command of Christ to be one, and in what respect could one speak of a true visible church on earth. Calvin resolved the issues by tying the one, holy, and catholic church to the election of God on the one hand, and the true church in its earthly form to marks of the church on the other. The balance of this paper focuses upon these latter aspects, the marks which constitute the visible church of Christ on earth. This focus on the marks of the visible church is more than just a recounting of Calvin's thought; it is also an invitation to recover their substance and to regain the essence of the church through this recovery.

1. The Visible and Invisible Church

Calvin gives a clear delineation of the distinction between the invisible church and the visible church.

Holy Scripture speaks of the church in two ways. (1) Sometimes by the term "church" it means that which is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then, . . . the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. (2) Often, however, the name "church" designates the whole multitude of humanity spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ (*Institutes*, 4.1.7).

In the first instance, the church is idealized; it is the collective of all true Christians called by God, for God, to God. It is the “great cloud of witnesses” spoken of by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 12:1). The one, holy, catholic church includes not only those that have died, but also true believers wherever they are presently found upon the earth.

In the second definition of the “visible” church, Calvin observes that mingled in its midst are “many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance” (*Institutes*, 4.1.7). Nevertheless, members of the church are to maintain and are commanded to revere and keep communion with this latter church. They keep fellowship with the visible church because within its borders is also contained the present invisible which is tied to all generations of true believers in Jesus Christ. In the visible church, it is witnessed that “the wheat and the tare grow together” (Matt. 13:24-30).

2. The Visible Church

The visible church is the mother of believers. Calvin states, “For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance . . .” (*Institutes*, 4.1.6). This leads to the heart of the question. If the visible church is the mother of believers and yet also beset with corruption, how can it be known, in this mix, when a church is no longer a church? When is it actually a true church, and not a false church bearing the name of church? How do members know that they are in the womb of a nurturing mother and not in the lair of a ravenous beast?

As Calvin quotes Augustine, there are “many sheep without, and many wolves within” (*Institutes*, 4.1.8). How do we know the church, i.e., what is the church? How is it distinguished from other institutions? How does the visible church make itself visible as the true church? Here Calvin turns to the marks of the church to make a clear distinction between the true visible church and a false church. Calvin posits two marks of the church, the word of God purely preached and heard, and the pure administration of the sacraments.¹

1 A third mark of the church is frequently given in Reformed-Presbyterian theology: that is the exercise of church discipline. This mark, however, is not given by Calvin, but articulated by later Reformed confessions such as the Belgic Confession. Calvin takes up church discipline in his treatment of the keys of the church.

3. The First Mark: Pure Preaching and Hearing

“Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached *and* heard” (*Institutes*, 4.1.9), this is where the true visible church is found. This leads into many questions. Perhaps the first leads into a consideration of personal piety which stems from the Reformation. Why is it that a person cannot sit down and read the Bible him/herself and let God speak?² For Calvin, the answer is that God is not bound to a particular outward means, but that God has bound us “to this ordinary manner of teaching” (*Institutes*, 4.1.5). Fanatical people, Calvin maintains, “refusing to hold fast to it entangle themselves in many deadly snares. Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous” (*Institutes*, 4.1.5). Calvin’s view was that in the Bible, from the Old Testament (OT) to the New Testament (NT), and cover to cover, God is seen working and proclaiming through the medium of humanity, whether that was Tabernacle, Temple, or Synagogue, but in all cases in the context of the gathered community. It is within this gathered community that consensus and community voice, that is, the unity of the church occurred. Calvin states, “Surely this is because believers have no greater help than public worship, for by it God raises his own folk upward step by step” (*Institutes*, 4.1.5). Those who stepped back from the church, relying on their own devices, were, for Calvin, nothing more and nothing less than schismatics who were by their very absence contributing to the disunity of the church. Pure doctrine emerges when people are gathered in unity to hear the word of God preached in purity, not when they are alone, speculating on individual interpretation.

3.1 Pure Preaching

This leads to what Calvin meant by *pure* preaching. For Calvin, this took multiple things into account. First and foremost it meant that the word of God, and the word of God alone, was to be expounded. Calvin would recoil at the number of sermons based primarily on pseudo-psychology, self-help doctrine, business principles, as well as countless other substitutes. In all honesty, these would all violate Calvin’s understanding of pure preaching. This is perhaps one of the great lessons of Calvin that needs to be recovered, i.e., what it is to preach purely. This

- 2 Calvin addresses this phenomenon in his *Commentary on Ephesians*: “That those who neglect instrument (the church), should hope to become perfect in Christ is utter madness. Yet such are the fanatics on the one hand, who pretend to be favored with secret revelations of the Spirit, – and proud men, on the other, who imagine that to them the private reading of the Scriptures is enough, and that they have no need of the ordinary ministry of the Church.” (*Commentary on Ephesians*, 1979, 282).

lesson cannot be stressed enough. It should be remembered that one of the two signs that a church belongs to God is pure preaching of the word of God. For Calvin, if this is not present, the church is also not present, and the church is for Calvin where the presence of God is, and participation in the church is so powerful that it keeps us in the society of God. It can be seen, then, that Calvin has a rather high view of preaching. Because of this, it also meant that those entrusted with preaching have tremendous obligations. Calvin himself dedicated the full measure of his body, mind, and spirit to the task of preaching, and he expected no less from his clergy. So it may help at this point to look at some of the things that Calvin did in approaching this task that he saw as signifying the church on earth.

Calvin saw preaching as the very center of his ministry. In his *Sermons on Ephesians*, Calvin states:

It is certain that if we come to church we shall not hear only a mortal person speaking but we shall feel (even by God's secret power) that God is speaking to our souls, that God is the teacher. God so touches us that the human voice enters into us and so profits us that we are refreshed and nourished by it. God calls us to God's self as if God's own mouth were open and we saw God there in person (*Sermons on Ephesians*, 1998, 42).

That is enough to make every clergy person break into a cold sweat, but that is precisely the point: for the most part, they do not. In all of this, Calvin did not see the clergy as elevated and the center of attention, far from it. When the word of God was preached, it meant that the preacher faded from view, the word of God overcoming her or his presence. In short, where the word of God is purely preached, focus and attention are *never* to be gathered by, for, or to the one preaching, but strictly, solely, and purely to the word of God. Whenever a ministry generated or focused upon the latest guru rather than upon the word of God is observed, it signifies, in Calvin's estimation, grave danger. The duty of the pastor in this is to turn "the eyes of humanity from the world, that they may look up to heaven" (*Commentary on the Epistle to Titus*, 1979, 283). This is the first way in which Calvin strives toward pure preaching - the vanishing pastor. That is, as the word of God is purely preached, the pastor vanishes as only the word of God can stand.

It has often been said that a pastor must practice what he or she preaches. For Calvin, this is an inversion. The preacher does not preach and then practice, the preaching comes from the practice. That is, a sermon is an outpouring of a life purely lived before God. Calvin's focus was to glorify God. If Calvin had permitted a headstone at his grave, the epithet there should rightly read: "His sole purpose was to bring glory to God." Calvin did this through relentlessly pushing his body in long hours of prayer and study in order to better understand the God whom

the Bible faithfully witnessed. Calvin knew his biblical languages, not because he learned them in two semesters at seminary, but because he insisted upon accurate understanding and detailed exegesis. Only by grappling with scriptures in their original languages personally and over a lifetime, would Calvin consider that he had properly prepared to preach the word purely. Calvin thought that a sharp mind and high levels of academic preparation were no less a part of being able to purely preach than a high level of personal piety. It was, in fact, a part of piety. Calvin's Geneva Academy was formed to provide his ministers with such training, to make sure that the clergy were the best minds in society, and not the laughing stocks they had become.

Pure preaching of the word meant, for Calvin, not simply detailed exegesis and focused, unadulterated exposition of a biblical text in its context (although it did mean that), but that it should be applicative. By application, Calvin would not understand things like "five ways to be more successful," or "ten steps to joy," or "how to live stress free." While these may all be worthwhile topics in some setting, they are not the application that Calvin would seek, since they are all anthropocentric. Having arrived at this point, attention shall now be shifted toward the pure *hearing* of the word. Since enough stress has already been put upon the pastors, it is time to put a bit on the saints.

3.2 Pure Hearing

Calvin's approach to application would be thoroughly theocentric. Here is a lesson absolutely buried in the commercial Christianity of America as well as in other parts of the world. Pastors have a good deal of pressure on them to "grow the church"; never mind, right now, that this is not their task even in the slightest. In order to attract new people, a shift in preaching has happened over the past few decades. The approach from the pulpit was to become "relevant" to the average life of the average person. This was to feed a commercial need typified in the question: "What are you going to tell me from the pulpit that will change my life?" This is now so commonplace that Calvin's applicative question is displaced as nonsense. What then is this applicative question of Calvin's?

This is put in the simplest of terms in the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648, penned some 84 years after Calvin's death. Question 1 asks: "What is the chief and highest goal of humanity?" Answer 1 responds: "Humanity's chief and highest goal is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy God for ever" (Westminster Catechism, Q&A 1). That probably sounds like a strange goal to some people. It was the true question of application for Calvin. If the preacher purely preached, the question of application was then, for those that had *purely* heard the word, simply: "how then can I best glorify God?" Calvin sought to make sure that his sermons glorified God and led to the obvious application of the glorification of

God in the individual's life.

Pure hearing of the word of God is as critical as pure preaching. Hearing with a wrong motive is as precarious as preaching with a wrong motive. It should be noted that the burden here with respect to priority belongs to the preacher, but it does not absolve the hearer from responsibility. Here, a bit of an extrapolation from Calvin's body of work: it seems that entering the average sanctuary in the United States, for example, the predominant attitude might be one of "what does God have for me today?" or perhaps "what will I get out of the sermon today?" Some pastors have put the sermon in such a context that at first hearing it may not sound too bad. However, Calvin would place an anathema upon both phrases. The order would be reversed, something like "what will the sermon call me to today?" Reworking U. S. President John F. Kennedy's phraseology, it would be something like "ask not what God will do for you, but what God is willing you to do for God." This is close to pure hearing.

Because pure preaching and hearing of the word is a sign that the church is the church, and if *pure*, (this cannot be stressed enough), preaching and hearing are absent, the church is not present, then the nature of the sermon should be revisited in its totality with some intensity. Valuable lessons from Calvin with respect to pure preaching of the word have no doubt been "lost".

There is one final observation to be made here. It is Calvin's reflection that "the church is built up solely by outward preaching" (*Institutes*, 4.1.5). This should also be taken into consideration when noting and investing fortunes in programs and people that promise to build up the church, for certainly for Calvin this understanding stands over and against the "sole" means of building up the church. In many instances, these new programs can, in fact, usurp the pure preaching and hearing of God's word.

Next, attention will be turned to the second sign or mark of the church, the second thing in Calvin's estimation that makes and marks the church as the church: the administration of the sacraments.

4. The Administration of the Sacraments

The church is present whenever "The sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution" (*Institutes*, 4.1.9). This is the second mark of the church. When Calvin speaks of sacraments, he speaks of two things: baptism and communion. Of the two sacraments constituting this mark of the church, the first, baptism is presently most at risk in Reformed-Presbyterian bodies. Here again, that which Calvin said has been "lost". It is most at risk based on numerous cases in which candidates for ministry and more recent designated practitioners of the pastorate have moved from Reformed understandings of the sacrament to what has been

referred to as the so-called “believers baptism.” All of this reasoning falls upon a highly pietistic and individual understanding of Christianity, the type which was addressed earlier, the very type Calvin thought impossible because it causes the individual to be severed from the church. This is a rather critical point, and while other traditions might withstand such a severing, those of the Reformed tradition simply cannot.

4.1 Baptism

Calvin did not think it appropriate that anyone should be excluded from the church. Calvin’s understanding of the sacraments, especially baptism, derives from his understanding that the whole economy of God in the OT and NT are involved. Calvin’s understanding of Paul in Galatians is:

. . . that is it of no consequence to what nation or condition anyone may belong; nor is circumcision any more regarded than gender or civil rank. And why? Because Christ makes them all one. Whatever have been their former differences, Christ alone is able to unite them all. “You are one: the distinction is now removed” (*Commentary on Galatians*, 1979, 112).

Calvin’s understanding is important. If the church began making any distinction, especially one as obvious as age, the floodgates were then poised to make other distinctions. Baptism was, for Calvin, the great leveler. The “lost lesson” of Calvin in this is no small point. The loss of the lesson means also that a distinction is made and with it an entire class of people are figured out of the society of Christ. These are the very things that should be of concern for a variety of reasons. The argument from believer’s baptism is, of course, that a person cannot be in some form of “personal faith” relationship with God until their cognitive abilities have developed and they can then express their faith in “adult” ways. After all, what if they do not “grow up in Christ?” Yet this runs to the heart of Calvin’s theological understanding of the sovereignty of God, and expresses something about the Doctrine of God one carries. Here, there is some belief that humanity can somehow “get out in front of God, as it were,” that God might be caught by surprise. The point here is not to plunge into a full blown polemic of infant vs. believer’s baptism, but rather to show that the trends of allowing those that hold to believer’s baptism to assume pastoral roles (within the Reformed tradition) endangers three fundamental tenants in Calvin’s theology: 1) his understanding of the communion of saints, 2) his understanding that OT and NT are integrally linked *theologically* (and not just as a storyline), 3) his understanding that in Christ there is to be no distinction of any class of people, especially as this is related to baptism. Furthermore, it displays a doctrine of God in which the sovereignty of God can be usurped by the machinations of humanity.

4.2 Communion

The sacrament of communion will be only briefly touched upon. Calvin's reasoning behind the exclusion of infants (and others) is three fold: 1) They cannot "discern" whether or not they are worthy (according to 1 Cor. 11), 2) They have to be able to exercise remembrance and proclamation, and 3) circumcision is the OT correspondence to baptism as Passover is to communion. While Calvin says all were admitted to circumcision, not everyone was admitted to Passover (*Institutes*, 4.16.30). He maintains that this is so clear that "if these men had a particle of sound brain left, would they be blind to a thing so clear and obvious?" (*Institutes*, 4.16.30). While I have strong disagreements with Calvin here, not least being his uneven application of interpretative method and logic, there is a lesson to be taken from Calvin which ought to be reflected upon: the holiness of the sacraments. They are not simply to be thrown out into the street, so to speak. The sacraments are the property of the church, a mark of the church, just as is the Passover in Calvin's point of correspondence. Sometimes people think that they can do these things alone, that communion can be a private matter between Christian friends. However, these are holy things that are administered decently and in order by the holy, catholic, and apostolic church. In some churches, communion is available in the entryway of the church, or at the front of the church following the service, where anyone can come anytime and receive communion. However, the words of Christ's institution are then not present. In these instances, we must consider Calvin's understanding that where communion is done in such a fashion, the church fails to be present. Reciprocally, "it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists" (*Institutes*, 4.1.9) where these two things (the word of God purely preached and heard and communion administered according to the institution of Christ) are present. This leads to a final consideration, the training of clergy, which is critical to Calvin's understanding of the maintaining of the marks of the church.

5. Clergy and the Marks

Calvin was as passionate about the clergy as he was with respect to the church. In his opening comments about the calling of ministers, Calvin says that "nowhere is there greater peril if anything be done irregularly" (*Institutes*, 4.3.10).

Calvin maintains that those who are chosen are to be of "sound doctrine and of holy life" (*Institutes*, 4.3.12). Furthermore, "we must always see to it that they be adequate and fit to bear the burden imposed upon them, that is, that they be instructed in those skills necessary for the discharge of their office" (*Institutes*, 4.3.12). This leads back to an earlier idea. For Calvin, the primary task, the task of tasks with respect to the minister, was the proclamation of the word. This is the

task in which Calvin says ministers need to be instructed. That is, the burden they carry is the proclamation of the word, so they need instruction in the skills of the proclamation of the word. A recent work, *Reclaiming God's Original Intent for the Church*, a bold title to be sure, has some good points to it, but it also insinuated that Calvin was not educated theologically, (Roberts and Marshall, 2004, 71) and further that this was not important to Calvin. However, Calvin founded the earliest seminary that began as a protestant seminary. He was especially keen, as has been seen, that ministers should be able to grapple with the biblical texts in their original languages. Furthermore, it must be remembered that one of the qualifications that Calvin saw for ministers was that they be sound in doctrine. This means, for Calvin, that theology of the doctrinal sort became an integral part of the Geneva Academy. It is important that this lesson not become lost precisely because ministers are practitioners of theology. Physicians practice medicine, attorneys practice law, and pastors practice theology. In more recent years, there has been an abandonment of pastors being practitioners of theology, in favor of them practicing business (which generally they do poorly), or psychology (which they are not trained for), or some other discipline. So, because of pastors abdicating the practice of their discipline, the church is cut loose from theology, and in Calvin's understanding this means nothing more or less than being severed from the word of God itself. It also means that the marks of the true church are in jeopardy since pastors are unable to theologically reflect on the significance and importance of their (marks of the church) role in preserving the church. The marks of the church are inviolable for many reasons, not the least of which is that they touch upon every aspect of church life and ministerial practice. There is a practical example of this.

6. Exemplar

Pastoral counseling, in its current manifestations, has abandoned its theological foundations. This is primarily due to the shifts in the field made by Seward Hiltner and Paul Ramsey. These drove pastoral care into "functionalist" understandings of the office. Two things have happened as a result of this shift. First (again generally) pastors do not have enough training to be competent counselors in the common understanding of the term. Much of it is, at best, a stumbling in the dark, trying to figure it all out. So in the first place, it is not counseling. Secondly, because of the shift to other disciplines as a starting point, theology and therefore the pastoral aspect of counseling has been abandoned. Therefore, in the second place, it is no longer pastoral.

The recovery of pastoral counseling is desperately needed. A genuine pastoral counseling exists, and in this I follow the excellent work of Eduard Thurneysen,

The Theology of Pastoral Care. Thurneysen sees pastoral care (and counseling is included in this term) as an *extention of proclamation* (Thurneysen, 1962, 13). When a pastor practices pastoral counseling, it is from Thurneysen's prespective, a form of pure proclamation of the word of God - a mark of the church. Thurneysen had it right.

When people undertake to speak to a pastor about an issue of life, they are seeking something higher and more profound than they are seeking in traditional counseling or therapy. They have come to a pastor because they are, at some level, seeking the word of God proclaimed. This does not mean that pastoral counseling is simply about quoting Bible passages to people. It is about empathy and understanding, and this means keen listening. The pastor must hear and understand not only the presenting issue, but issues which stand beyond it to ultimate issues. The pastor must then listen, and then look for entrances where deep theological reflection may lead the parishioner to come to terms with the word of God regarding the situation, and importantly proclaim the Gospel to those seeking it within the confines of the pastoral practice of counseling.

Given this task, the pastor then understands what his or her role is. It is not that of a psychologist, therapist, or family counselor. When the pastor understands the role of pastoral counseling, it also becomes clear when people need to be referred to appropriate professionals. This means that the pastor needs to have a network of professionals in place that can immediately be called upon for referral. Pastoral care is unique and cannot take the place of other professionals trained in various specialities any more than those specialists can fill the role of a pastoral counselor. This means that pastoral care, grounded in the word of God, moves into territory where psychology simply cannot go, into the secret of the human condition and redemption through Jesus Christ (Thurneysen, 1962, 201).

This phenomenon can be seen repeating in every area of church life and pastoral leadership. In every area of pastoral life and practice, the minister should seek to purely preach, listen, and administer the sacraments given by Jesus Christ with regularity and correctness. Whenever this occurs, the church upon earth moves toward the marks of trueness and allows those seeking the true church to see in clarity that the marks of the true and visible church are present.

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Calvinova obilježja Crkve: Poziv na obnovu

Sažetak

Kao reformator Calvin se borio s pitanjem jedinstva Crkve. Ako Crkva nije bila više vidljivo jedna, nametala su se dva pitanja. Prvo, na koji način i u kojem bi pogledu reformacijske crkve mogle održati Kristovu zapovijed da budu jedno, te u kojem pogledu se može govoriti o istinskoj vidljivoj Crkvi na zemlji. Calvin je riješio ta pitanja vezujući jedinu, svetu i sveopću Crkvu s Božjim izborom s jedne strane, i istinsku Crkvu u njezinom zemaljskom obliku s obilježjima Crkve s druge strane. Ovaj rad je usredotočen na ove posljednje aspekte, na obilježja koja tvore vidljivu Kristovu Crkvu na zemlji. Usredotočenje na obilježja vidljive Crkve nije samo prepričavanje Calvinove misli, već je i poziv na otkrivanje njihove biti te njihovim obnavljanjem vraćanje suštine Crkve.