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Citation for published version:

Fergusson, D 2010, 'Calvin's Theological Legacy' *Ecclesiology*, vol 6, no. 3, pp. 274-289. DOI: 10.1163/174553110X518559

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1163/174553110X518559](https://doi.org/10.1163/174553110X518559)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Ecclesiology

Publisher Rights Statement:

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BRILL

Ecclesiology 6 (2010) 274–289



Calvin's Theological Legacy*

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Abstract

Often caricatured for its rigidity, harshness and hostility to the arts, Calvinism has suffered from frequent misrepresentation, not least in Scotland. In particular, the identification of Calvin's theology with double predestination and religious intolerance present formidable difficulties for a contemporary appropriation of his work. While adopting a critical approach to key aspects of Calvin's thought, this essay nevertheless seeks to understand and to recover other important features of his life and work including his rhetorical strategy, the concept of divine accommodation, and his approach to church, sacraments and ministry which remains an important ecumenical resource.

Keywords

Calvin, Reformed theology, predestination, providence, accommodation

The Challenge

It may be as well to begin an address such as this by admitting to the inherent difficulties in appropriating Calvin today. He has had a bad press, not least in Scotland where the term 'Calvinist' has now become a pejorative term, usually of opprobrium. It is employed to designate whatever is socially cramping, repressed, over industrious, or intolerant of diversity and the simple pleasures of life. Almost as much as the term 'medieval', it is misused as a broad brush term of reproach. An eloquent example of this in Edwin Muir's well known poem, 'The Incarnate One'.

*) Based upon the presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Scottish Church Theology Society at Crieff Hydro in January 2009 to mark the quincentenary of Calvin's birth.

The Word made flesh here is made word again
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
And God three angry letters in a book,
And there the logical hook
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological argument.¹

It is tempting in the face of such castigation to highlight some distinctive feature of Calvin's life and work that will commend him to a modern audience – we might think here variously of his commitment to historical scholarship, literacy, education, the relief of poverty, more egalitarian patterns of government, or his condemnation of excessive disparities between the rich and poor. There is some point in this, but a pick and mix approach to Calvin may do little more than identify some themes in his teaching that resonate with modern sensibilities, as if our current fashions are the arbiter for what is enduring in Calvin's work.

What we need to recognise is that Calvin's social vision was animated by a *theology*, in particular by one that was grounded in his reading of the Scriptures. If we are to re-appropriate important features of Calvin's output then we have to recognise the fundamental unity of his theology and preaching, and to assess this in its entirety. Here again, difficulties confront the interpreter. Calvin is often singled out by church historians and theologians for two things – his doctrine of predestination and his treatment of Michael Servetus. I discovered this when in the year 2000 I contributed an article to the *Tablet* for a series on spiritual stars of the millennium. My draft was returned to me for revision on both subjects. When he telephoned, I told the editor that Calvin's doctrine of predestination was not much different from that of Thomas Aquinas and that there was plenty of textual support in the *Summa Theologiae* for the burning of Servetus. While accepting the point, he required me nevertheless to say more about both these subjects. We will return to each in due course.

One further challenge facing the exponent of Calvin in this quincentenary year is his personality and style. He does not command the devotion and interest amongst Reformed churches that for example Luther does for Lutherans or Wesley for Methodists. We pay little attention to Reformation Sunday, and having nothing to compare with Aldersgate Sunday in the church

¹ Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1963), p. 228.

year.² Nor do we have a hymn of Calvin to rival that of *Ein' Feste Burg* or any of Charles Wesley's great compositions. What's more, Calvin is not instantly quotable and memorable; there is little trace of humour in his writings, something that Karl Barth remarked upon, suggesting that it might be symptomatic of some deeper theological problem. That lightness of being that Barth found as 'the joyful partisan of the good God' was apparently not matched by anything in Calvin.

Although he is again hardly alone in this respect, there is also too much name-calling and vituperative rhetoric in Calvin's writings – this is hard for modern readers taught to interpret *in optimam partem* and to maintain scholarly standards of courtesy. In addition, Calvinism does not appear to have produced anything quite as moving and uplifting in the artistic world as the music of Bach, often claimed by Lutherans as the great cultural treasure of their tradition. So it seems that we face formidable difficulties in identifying his abiding theological legacy.

Nevertheless, in what follows I offer an appreciation of Calvin as a theologian who was Reformed, catholic and ecumenical. This arises from a conviction that his work has an important contribution to make to the wider traditions of the church today, even if it must also learn from these and be corrected by them.

Rhetorical Strategy

The more I read Calvin, the more impressed I become by the simple majesty of his prose style. The French version of the *Institutes* is a landmark in modern French literature, and even in English translation one senses something of his love of Renaissance scholarship and an unadorned felicitous style. His language is simple and accessible, yet commensurate with the grandeur of the subject of which he writes. It could be described as bracing and unsentimental, and it reflects the two hermeneutical virtues that he impressed upon all preachers of the gospel. These are *facilitas* and *brevitas*.³ Nowhere does he allow his learning to get between him and his public audience, and although the *Institutes* (1559) runs to many hundreds of pages this is a relatively concise work compared to the *Summa* of Aquinas or Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. There

² Though not generally in Scotland, Reformation Sunday is celebrated elsewhere in Europe. Its liturgical colour is red, denoting the Holy Spirit and the martyrs of the church.

³ See T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

is something in this style that is relevant to understanding Calvin's audience and the overriding intention of his theology. He writes not for a narrow academic group or for those who are technically proficient in theology, although these are amongst his constituency. His work is directed towards a much larger public, particularly those that need assistance in understanding the Scriptures that have now been placed into their hands by the work of translators. The *Institutes* emerged initially as an exposition of the Apostles' Creed and developed from there. And of course we should remember that the great part of Calvin's output consisted of commentaries and sermons.

The unsentimental nature of Calvin's work strikes the modern reader forcefully. There is no easy indulgence of the emotions, no distraction from the central theme, nothing that is in danger of becoming sticky, synthetic or false in its emotional register. (The metrical psalms and Scottish paraphrases also reflect these aesthetic forms.) Doubtless this may have had something to do with Calvin's personality, and his determination to be self-effacing and lacking in psychological disclosure. The pulpit and the lectern were never to be used for exposing one's inner self or personal development, even if Calvin was not averse to settling the odd score or two. Perhaps too Calvin's chronically bad health contributed to his resolute style – there is no room for self-pity, despair, or complaint. The job has got to be done irrespective of how one feels first thing in the morning, and Calvin must have felt pretty wretched on many of them. He would not even allow his followers to place him in a marked grave with a dedicated tombstone. So the style and tone of Calvin's theology still speak to us – these offer a model for theological writing and preaching that eschews all self-indulgence, particularly in a culture that is preoccupied with celebrity status and public disclosure.

The Practical Tasks of Theology

But there is also a substantive theological conviction governing Calvin's rhetorical strategy. This is his view that the business of life, and therefore of theology, is primarily about two things. These are our obedience and worship of God, expressions that recur throughout his writings. What this means is that there is no division in Calvin between practical and systematic theology; these are one and the same task. The teaching of true doctrine is a central function of the church simply because it promotes our obedience to God's law and our offering of the worship that God requires of us. The glory of God is more important than the purchase of our individual salvation, a prioritising that has

often been lost sight of in much evangelicalism since Calvin. Closely allied to this conviction about the practical function of doctrine is his commitment to Scripture as the principal means of our instruction in the faith. This functions alongside a criticism of more speculative patterns of theology that separate the knowledge of God from the knowledge of ourselves. The modern theological curriculum with its division of labour is detrimental to this with Biblical studies, doctrine and practical theology being undertaken by different groups of people who belong to different scholarly guilds too often estranged from each other. The general practitioner is increasingly a casualty of our academic aspirations, appointment procedures and research assessment exercises. Yet, for Calvin, the theologian by the very nature of the task must be something of a general practitioner – a scholar who knows Scripture, the history of the tradition, the apologetic concerns of the age, and the pastoral exigencies of the faith community. He or she should not be obsessed by the need to feign originality or to promote innovation.

Calvin's criticism of speculative theology is worth recalling, particularly given the current penchant for inner-trinitarian contemplation and the revival of Christian neo-Platonist philosophy. Here is what he says about Pseudo-Denys: 'The theologian's task is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable. If you read that book, you would think a man fallen from heaven recounted, not what he had learned, but what he had seen with his own eyes.'⁴ Theology thus walks by faith in those insights that the Scriptures of the Church provide. But we should not seek to abstract from this, or to get above, behind or beyond the faith of Israel and Jesus. In cautioning us against a servile and inflated commitment to grandiose philosophical ideas, Calvin sets a standard for a measured, practical and Scripturally-focused approach to theology. That will not suit everyone of course, but it may be a corrective that the Reformed tradition can usefully provide.

The Doctrines of Predestination and Providence

These two ideas are closely related in Calvin and express together the sovereignty, justice and love of the Creator. Calvin is of course a theologian of the

⁴) *Institutes* I.14.4; ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, in *Library of Christian Classics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).

Reformation and therefore he follows Luther's theme of *sola gratia*. The obedience and worship of God are only possible because of divine grace. God condescends to meet us where we are and to lift us from the ruins of our fallen human nature. In Christ, our sins are forgiven so that we are justified and granted a constant access to God's grace by the Holy Spirit. All this is standard Reformation teaching and Calvin is at pains to present it as also the teaching of the catholic tradition from which the church of Rome has for a time lapsed.

Much of his theological effort is thus expended in discussions of the Church Fathers, most notably Augustine. Although Calvin occasionally departs from Augustine, he repeatedly claims his writings as support for his own position. There are over 3,200 explicit references to patristic sources in Calvin, and over half of these are to Augustine, most of them commendatory.⁵ In particular, Calvin follows Augustine in his anti-Pelagianism. The work of faith cannot be ascribed to human effort, choice or deliberation; faith itself must be seen as a gift of the Spirit, part of God's gracious work within us. Therefore, the fact that some believe and others do not is to be explained by God's gracious election; some are chosen and others are passed over. This is God's primal decision, the decree of election and reprobation, and it establishes the end point of creation and salvation. For Calvin, it is linked to God's providential government of the world that brings everything to its appointed end by presiding over all the means. There is no part of the causal process in nature or history that lies beyond the reach and scope of this wise divine government.

While the doctrine of election appeared in Luther's early polemical essay against Erasmus, it quickly falls away in subsequent Lutheran teaching, especially that of Melancthon.⁶ There the doctrine of predestination becomes a minor locus and it is determined by divine foreknowledge of human choices. It was the Reformed tradition, by contrast, that generally exalted the doctrine of predestination and taught it with its full Augustinian force, this becoming one of the main points of friction with the Lutherans. Calvin believed that it was the logical corollary of the doctrine of grace, the clear teaching of Scripture, an article taught by Augustine and the leading theologians of the Middle Ages, and even an outcome of natural theology. In this last respect, Calvin believed that we could see traces of God's favouring of some and displeasure with

⁵ See Brian Gerrish, 'The Place of Calvin in Christian Theology', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 291.

⁶ M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: James Clarke, 1957).

others by the markedly different outcomes of human life, even amongst infants. ‘We must see that some mothers have full provision for their infants, and others almost none, according as it is the pleasure of God to nourish one child more liberally, and another more sparingly.’⁷

Some commentators have sought to distance Calvin from Augustine. We are told that election was always a single decree for Augustine, Aquinas and Scotus, whereas Calvin made it a double decree.⁸ For the most part, this remains implausible. There is obviously a dark side of predestination in Augustine, particularly with respect to those who die in infancy unbaptised. The logical consequence of this doctrine, in which only a few are saved by virtue of a primal divine decree that is the cause of everything that happens, must be that the remainder are passed over, and therefore rendered lost and reprobate. And in any case, Calvin himself and the Reformed tradition tried to assert a measure of asymmetry in linking election and reprobation. The Westminster Confession, for example, uses different verbs in its description in Chapter III of this double aspect of predestination. So Calvin can claim with some justification that his doctrine of election is not innovative but is simply a re-expression of what we find in Augustine and many of the leading theologians of the Latin West. Yet the double decree haunts the Augustinian tradition – though not Orthodox theology. Its anti-Pelagian polemic has cast a shadow over both Roman Catholic and Protestant thought, albeit in different ways.

Where Calvin parts company from Augustine is in loosening the connection between the divine decree and the sacramental actions of the church. These are not always bound to each other. This is particularly useful in the case of dying children whose election may be secured by the extraordinary grace of God whether or not they have been lawfully baptised. Calvin also differs from Augustine in claiming that the knowledge of our election is a source of confidence and assurance in the Christian life. Augustine, by contrast, had tended to argue that since only God knows the elect we can never be sure of who they are – his teaching thus tilts towards mystery and reserve. To put it rather crudely, what this amounts to is that Augustine seems to recommend that we forget about predestination in living the Christian life, whereas Calvin

⁷) *Institutes* 1.16.3.

⁸) The differences between Calvin and Augustine on election are usefully set out by Gerrish, *op. cit.* Richard Cross shows how Scotus sought to escape the double side of predestination, before questioning whether this is really persuasive: *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 102–3.

commends it for our edification. This foregrounding of the doctrine is perhaps what really raised the hackles of critics, Lutheran and otherwise, while also creating a good deal of anxiety within the Reformed camp itself, even within Calvin's own community.⁹ Most of the controversies that beset Reformed theology in the next two centuries might be traced to these same anxieties: the appearance of Bolsec in Geneva, the subsequent tensions between Calvin and Bullinger on election, the hypothetic universalism of Cameron, Amyraut and the Saumur (Reformed) Academy in France, the Arminian controversy in the Netherlands and the Marrow controversy in Scotland. It seems that the tradition has always been haunted by one of its own principal doctrines. It illustrates the acuteness of Brian Gerrish's remark that Calvin's 'place in the history of Christian theology is partly given by his ability to set an agenda and incite dissent.'¹⁰

On the subject of providence, Calvin is equally determinist. There is nothing outside the scope of God's wise government of the universe. Although he resists both Epicurean and Stoic themes, it is clear that he is much closer to Stoic fatalism than Epicurean randomism. Again he has much of the Christian tradition on his side here. 'What's for you will not go by you' runs deep in the Scottish psyche and also neatly summarises much of what we find in Calvin's doctrine of providence. This is evident in his treatment of primary and secondary causes – the standard medieval way of reconciling the integrity of creaturely causes with the necessity of the divine will – and also in the way he sees every misfortune, moment of suffering and evil outcome as attributable to God's will. As the primal cause, God accompanies and wills each secondary cause together with its effects. The practical outcome of this is the requirement of constant gratitude, patience and acceptance of all that happens. Grateful in the midst of blessing, patient in the face of adversity – this is the practical prescription of the Reformed tradition. There is not much scope here for Jewish refrains of complaint and lament.

And yet notwithstanding the problems, the Reformed doctrine of providence has its achievements. It encouraged and emboldened people, often against the odds. The Scots Confession perceives God's rule as exercised amidst trouble, persecution and hardship. It is only the godless who experience calm and carefree lives – this is something like an inversion of much modern piety

⁹ Bill Naphy makes the interesting proposal that while the doctrine worked quite well for persecuted refugees fleeing to Geneva, for a settled Protestant society it was more puzzling and unsettling. See 'Calvin's Geneva' in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, op. cit., p. 33.

¹⁰ Gerrish, op. cit., p. 302.

where the providential lifestyle is one that is altogether free of undeserved suffering and meaningless misfortunes.¹¹ The Heidelberg Catechism offers the most celebrated statement of Reformed providence and this found its way into constructions of personal biographies and life-stories:

Q.27 What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but his fatherly hand.

Q.28 What advantage comes from acknowledging God's creation and providence?

A. We learn that we are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing, and to trust our faithful God and Father for the future, assured that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot even move.¹²

We should not underestimate the hold that this has upon people's lives, nor the practical benefits that it offers. It can call upon some Scriptural support, particularly the long and winding story of Joseph and his brothers. Occasionally, in preaching against the notion that everything happens according to God's will, I have been taken aback at resistance to this. Sometimes, it seems we need to believe that even our illnesses and misfortunes are from the hand of God and serve some greater and mysterious purpose.

Yet the doctrine stands in need of adjustment for several reasons. Much of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, sees the world as other than God wills it to be. The divine rule must therefore take the form of a dramatic struggle as opposed to a serene and total control of everything that happens. The world is not everywhere under the divine dominion – it stands in need of redemption. Other theological traditions have wisely pressed for a distinction between divine permission and willing in this context. Yet the western tendency to collapse permission into an active willing in order to save God as the

¹¹ 'This battell hes not the carnal men, being destitute of Goddis Spirite': 'Confessio Scotica', Ch. 13, Ian Hazlett (ed.), in *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften*, Vol. 2/1 1559–1563 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), p. 262.

¹² Arthur C. Cochrane (ed.), *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (London: SCM, 1966), pp. 309–310.

primary cause of everything has tended to destroy the distinction.¹³ Calvin's attempt to read off divine providence from our personal biographies and the history of the world is also fraught with danger. It can lead to the mistaken perception of God ordaining events, particularly in the political domain, where instead prophetic criticism should be the more appropriate reaction. Moreover, in attributing evil and suffering to an inscrutable higher purpose, we can too easily lose contact with the *parental* dimension of providence. God's love is a personal love that is directed to each one of us for our own benefit, and not only to some overarching cosmic purpose in which we are as cogs in a grand clockwork mechanism.

There is no easy way out of this doctrine of providence into an alternative account that will maintain for us the strengths of the Calvinist model – its sense of divine sovereignty, the overarching love of God, the direction and guidance that our lives so often crave. Attempts to re-envision providence (e.g. open theism) sometimes lose sight of the benefits of the tradition that is being abandoned, as well as attempting an overall coherence that may simply be inaccessible. The best that one might hope for is an account that is more strongly focussed on the convictions of faith and that does not make overblown claims for a divine providence that we cannot envision. Such an account will be more modest, deflationary, less comprehensive, more pneumatological, and with a higher tolerance of tension and brokenness in theological thought. Yet maybe this less speculative, more pragmatist, and Scripturally-driven approach is exactly what Calvin would elsewhere have commended. The providence of God accommodates itself to our condition and is thus resourceful, patient, and exercised with a wondrous improvisation. We need to say this more loudly than Calvin did, and in faithfulness to Scripture and the experience of the people of God. *Semper reformanda...*

The doctrine of predestination faces difficulties, even more formidable than Calvin's account of providence. The most fundamental of these is its sub-evangelical character. If this doctrine is the root of the faith, then it is not good news but very mixed news for human beings. Only a portion amongst us will attain God's kingdom, since this is what God wills from all eternity. The difficulty here is that it fails to capture the inclusive love of God as attested in the teaching and lifestyle of Jesus. It is a love for all, not merely a few. It is directed to those who seem most lost, as well as those who are in the circle of the faithful. The goodwill of God has the whole creation as its object, and not merely

¹³ See David Bentley Hart, 'Providence and Causality: on divine innocence', Francesca Murphy & Philip Ziegler (eds), *The Providence of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 34–56.

a portion of angels and human beings. For this reason, the doctrine of election, rather than guaranteeing faith and securing our confidence, is in danger of subverting it. In this respect, it may be the worst doctrine ever devised by Christian theologians. So within the modern Reformed tradition, it has witnessed a significant loss of support and a determination to revise it. Both Schleiermacher and Barth, the leading Reformed theologians in the centuries after Calvin, see *all* human beings as elected by God. For Schleiermacher, the double aspect of the doctrine can only refer to the gradual spread of faith across history. It is a vanishing distinction as the kingdom of God increases. There are always people who do not believe, but we must think of these as somewhere along the way to God's salvation rather than as those who are forever excluded. In the end, all will be gathered in. For Barth, Jesus Christ is both the electing God and the rejected human being. In his work, the divine rejection is overcome and therefore all are included amongst the elect. So for Barth too, notwithstanding his differences from Schleiermacher, we should think more hopefully of those outside the church as on the way to becoming Christians, as opposed to those who are eternally rejected. The doctrine of election is not a mixed doctrine but one of unequivocal good news for all people. Much of the Reformed participation in modern ecumenical dialogue, for example the Leuenberg Concordat, has tended to opt for this more universalist construction of election and has thus overcome historical differences with the Lutheran church.

The Accommodating God

The theme of 'accommodation' is one that runs through Calvin's theology. In an important article, my late friend and colleague David Wright drew attention to its prevalence and to the surprising ways in which it can work.¹⁴ Calvin is often caricatured for his stress on divine transcendence and sovereignty, as if God is always gazing upon us from a great height, with exacting standards and a disapproving view of our chronic inability to meet them. Yet this is a caricature. For Calvin, the divine transcendence is always matched by a condescension or accommodation that patiently takes into account our creaturely capacities. This theme of accommodation, which is found everywhere in his

¹⁴ David F. Wright, 'Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism: Equity, Hardness of Heart, and Divine Accommodation in the Mosaic Harmony Commentary', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 21 (1986), pp. 33–50.

theology, is employed to show that God chooses individuals, gives laws, and directs Israel in such a way as to accommodate human weakness and frailty.¹⁵ It also extends to the provision of Scripture, the two sacraments and to the office of the ordained ministry. These are the ways in which God's love is accommodated to our human capacities, ways in which the transcendent God is also one who accompanies us and enters into our condition. So transcendence is always matched by a contrasting emphasis upon divine immanence. God is with us, as also beyond us. This stress also brings a corresponding seriousness in Calvin's treatments of the means of grace, particularly the Church, sacraments and ministry. And here again he emerges as a Reformed catholic – one who owns the traditions and emphases of earlier writers and teachers. In particular, his work at this juncture reveals a sustained appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the sanctified life of the individual and the community. It was for this reason that, at the 400th anniversary of his birth, B. B. Warfield famously spoke of Calvin as the theologian of the Holy Spirit – his pneumatology enabling him to account for the ongoing work of God in the church and the world.¹⁶

When we come to his ecclesiology and sacramentology, Calvin's work reveals a remarkable catholicity which might surprise those who are acquainted only with five-point Calvinism and modern evangelicalism. He is happy to affirm the dictum of Cyprian that he cannot have God has his father who does not have the church as his mother. '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 until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels'.¹⁷ This emphatic insistence that 'there is no other way' illustrates the necessity and importance of the church in Calvin's theology.

Calvin's own ministry of course was largely devoted to developing the Reformed church. The church was not something that he could take for granted; it was not simply part of his social landscape as it has been for many theologians. In both Strasbourg and Geneva, it was threatened by internal and external forces and much of his energy was expended in reforming it and

¹⁵ Wright comments, 'The distinctive element in this presentation seems not the gracious condescension of God but his malleability, even his vulnerability, indeed even his captivity to the passions and lusts of his rude people.' *Op. cit.*, 46.

¹⁶ B. B. Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today* (Edinburgh: Hope Trust, 1909), p. 11. The location of this essay has been hitherto obscure but is now available online at: <http://homepage.mac.com/shaneroseenthal/reformationink/bbwcalvin1.htm>.

¹⁷ *Institutes* IV.1.4.

establishing patterns of worship, discipline and government. Against Catholic critics, he was determined to prove that it was not inherently schismatic or out of touch with the great traditions of faith, while in the face of the Radical Reformation he sought to maintain order and to offset the individualism of much that emerged in sixteenth-century Christianity. On his deathbed, he remarked that when he came to Geneva, there was preaching and destruction of idols but no reformation. It was the creation of a church faithful to the Word of God that was the driving aim of his ministry.

While affirming the invisible church, there is a concentration in Calvin's writings on the visible institution. Though everywhere mixed and impure, it is identified by the preaching and hearing of the Word and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution. Where these marks are apparent, the visible church is to be respected. This is the standard by which every congregation is to be measured and accorded the title 'church'.¹⁸ This guards against unnecessary separation and unlawful schism.

On the sacraments, Calvin too belongs to the catholic traditions of the church, maintaining that these are means of grace, that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated frequently, that the presence of Christ by the Spirit in the Eucharistic element is real and substantial, and that the regular reception of the Supper is given for the nourishment of faith within us. Here Calvin follows Luther more closely than Zwingli, and thus has enabled the Reformed tradition to position itself within a catholic and ecumenical mainstream. Ironically, the Church of Scotland has yet to do full justice to Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper, particularly in the need for more frequent celebration and a clearer enunciation of his doctrine of the real presence.

Church and State

Calvin's Geneva is sometimes charged with being a theocracy. This is a mistake. Although there is a coordination of civil and religious government, as seen in the different responsibilities and constitution of the Senate and the Consistory, there is no attempt to create a scenario in which the levers of political power are all in the hands of the leaders of the church. Here we have to distinguish Geneva from Zürich where more theocratic models of government are apparent. The statue of Zwingli outside the Wasserkirche in Zürich depicts him holding the Bible in one hand and a sword in the

¹⁸) *Institutes* IV.1.11

other.¹⁹ This represents a union of church and civil society in which temporal and spiritual concerns are fused. The ideal of organising the whole of society according to the Word of God and following Old Testament precedents runs deep in the Reformed tradition. However, in Geneva, Calvin articulates a distinction between civil and religious government that is more reminiscent of Luther's Two Kingdoms theory.²⁰ The office of the magistrate was ordained by God for the maintenance of peace and justice within the territorial boundaries of the state. The magistrate was authorized to exercise force in carrying out this task. By contrast, the government of the church was spiritual and to be exercised by office bearers appointed from within the church. Calvin here establishes a position which rejects Anabaptist withdrawal from civil society on the one side, and state control of the church on the other. In this respect, it is incorrect to label his position theocratic. Yet it is not hard to see how this charge has arisen. In both his theology and Genevan ministry, Calvin sought a close partnership between church and civil authorities. The magistrate had a duty to uphold not only the second but also the first table of the law which outlines our duties to God. This entailed the civil protection of the Reformed churches, the suppression of serious heresy and the prohibition of the mass. The partnership between church and civil society characterized Reformed churches at other times and places. The *Scots Confession* of 1560 sets out the standard Reformation teaching about the divinely appointed office of political rule. It insists explicitly that judges and princes are 'to maintain true religion and to suppress all idolatry and superstition' and then proceeds to cite Old Testament examples of godly kings who complied.²¹

The model of course never worked perfectly in practice. Uniformity of faith was not achieved since dissent persisted and eventually had to be accommodated. There were frequent tensions over the division of responsibility between state and church. Who for example was entitled to excommunicate? What would happen if the church adopted a policy that created social tensions within Geneva? These were real problems that exercised the authorities in Calvin's own time.

¹⁹ Cf. W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 282–310.

²⁰ *Institutes*, IV.20. Cf. Eberhard Busch, 'Church and Politics in the Reformed Tradition', *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 180–195; Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 219–234.

²¹ *Scots Confession*, Chapter XXIV.

In an important respect, the Calvinist preoccupation with civic transformation is a recognition of the corporate and societal dimension of sanctification. The writ of Christ runs everywhere, and is not confined to any private, spiritual or ecclesiastical sphere. The Word of God determines our social life in all its economic, political and civic dimensions. It provides a standard by which the governing authorities are to be respected but also measured and criticised. This has enabled Reformed communities to have a more robust political theology than many of their Lutheran counterparts – there have been powerful expressions of this in more recent times in the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) and the *Belhar Confession* (1982). In some ways, Calvin's correlation of state and church still works quite well if we see it as advocating a form of partnership between the political and the ecclesiastical, this being the outworking of an attitude of critical support such as we find already in Romans 13. However, the need to maintain a critical distance of church from state for the sake of both might require a loosening of the bonds that we find in the Genevan consistory. And in any case the larger scale of the Reformed churches in other countries, including the Netherlands and Scotland, meant that this was never feasible.

There is of course one other reason for seeking to maintain support for the state at a greater critical distance and that has to do with the importance of religious toleration. Here we encounter again the Servetus episode, so often cast in the teeth of Calvinists by their opponents. For the record, we should note that Servetus had already been sentenced to death for his anti-trinitarian views by a Catholic court in Vienne, a city twenty miles south of Lyon, and he would have burned there had he not escaped to Geneva. Again, it is simply a mistake to represent Calvin as having a peculiarly vindictive and brutal attitude to heresy in the mid-sixteenth century. Having scrutinised Servetus' views, Calvin felt compelled to recommend the same sentence and eventually this came to pass following support from the Swiss confederation. All one might say in Calvin's mitigation is that he recommended death by hanging rather than the more awful burning that ensued. The event was undoubtedly a stain on Geneva's reputation, especially as it harboured such large numbers of refugees who had been persecuted elsewhere in Europe. Judged by later standards of toleration, Calvin's actions are deeply reprehensible. And when considered alongside early advocates of religious tolerance such as Erasmus and Castellio, he is also found wanting.²²

²² For a helpful account of Calvin's dealings with Servetus see Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 217–232.

Determined to maintain the orthodox faith in Geneva, Calvin had no time or place for those who were heterodox. The drive of his ministry was towards consolidation and greater consistency of religious belief and practice. He also adhered to the notion that each state must inevitably have its own particular religious identity. *Cuius regio, eius religio* – the confessional allegiance of the ruling body will determine the religion of the populace. We are some way here from the modern recognition of religious diversity and the individual freedom to profess according to the dictates of one's conscience.

This reminds us is that Calvin in many ways is a figure who stands between two worlds – the medieval and the modern. He affirms a classical world view, and the need for individuals to recognise their bondage to sin and to submit themselves by the grace of God to an order that is not of their making. At the same time, there is a recognition of equality under the Word of God, the need for a distribution of powers, and the capacity of each individual to read and understand the Scriptures.

Norman Kemp Smith, arguably the greatest Scottish philosopher of the twentieth century, often commended this perennial feature of Calvinism – it maintained the inherent weakness of human nature, our need of constant discipline and correction, and the eschewal of any worldview that sees history as inevitably progressive.²³ For this reason, amongst others, Reformed Christians today will find themselves continuing to experience the tensions between the medieval and the modern. There is no ultramontane retreat to a golden age of Catholic faith, but nor can there be a complacent confidence in the forces of secularism or liberal democracy to carry us forward to a better future. Always, there is a return to the Scriptures in search of correction, criticism and transformation under the Holy Spirit. This is the path of obedience, and by grace our way of attesting the glory of God.

²³ See Norman Kemp Smith, 'The Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Modern Mind', in A. J. D. Porteous, R. D. MacLennan and G. E. Davie (eds), *The Credibility of Divine Existence: Collected Papers of Norman Kemp Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1967) pp. 196–213.