

4. JOHN CALVIN: THE REFORMER AND THE NECESSITY OF REFORM

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John Calvin was a theologian, author, pastor, preacher and even a jurist, and in each of these roles he was self-consciously a Reformer. From 1533, following his spiritual awakening, Calvin was associated with reformist movements within the Roman church and gradually aligned openly with the Reformation.¹ His unexpected call to Geneva in 1536 overruled his desire to be a scholar and author and thrust him into the role of Reformer.

At the end of his career, bidding farewell to his colleagues in Geneva, he recalled that at first in Geneva he ‘found almost nothing in it’: apart from evangelical preaching ‘there was no reformation’.² In January 1537 the Genevan preachers presented the Council with the *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church* (henceforth, *Articles*), to which Calvin was presumably a significant contributor. They pleaded that ‘it is not possible to reduce everything to good order in a moment, if only because the ignorance of the people would not allow it’, but asserted that the moment had arrived when things could be consolidated so the church was better conformed to God’s Word.³

1. B. Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 33–46.

2. J. Calvin, ‘Calvin’s Farewell to the Minister of Geneva’, in H. Beveridge (ed.), *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, repr. edn, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 7:385.

3. J. Calvin, ‘Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva Proposed by the Ministers at the Council’, in J. K. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), pp. 48–49.

The course of reform in Geneva was not smooth, and by April 1538 Calvin and Farel left Geneva. In the ensuing interlude in Strasbourg, Calvin's direction as a Reformer developed considerably. He learned a great deal about church order from Bucer and was also involved in the wider movement for church reform, including the colloquies of 1540–41 seeking reunion with Catholics.⁴

When Calvin returned to Geneva in September 1541 he had far greater freedom and was an emerging leader in the wider Reformation. He could insist that the church have a settled order as prescribed by Scripture. The Council agreed that Articles of church polity be drawn up.⁵ These were soon presented as the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (henceforth, *Ordinances*).⁶

This chapter explores Calvin's understanding of 'reformation' through his programmatic treatise *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (henceforth, *Necessity*).⁷ Two years after Calvin's return to Geneva the Emperor Charles V called a diet in Speyer which he hoped would unite his forces to fight France, including some rapprochement with the Lutherans.⁸ Bucer wondered about writing a letter to the emperor setting out the case for church reform and sought Calvin's advice. Calvin took on the task and completed the document, addressed to Charles and the other princes of the Holy Roman Empire, in time for the February diet. There is no evidence that the document gained any significant attention at the diet.⁹ It did allow Calvin to set out the case for reform and his priorities, while he was still in the midst of reforming the church in Geneva. Beza considered it

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4. See W. van't Spijker, 'Bucer's Influence on Calvin', in D. F. Wright (ed.), *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 371; S. M. Manetsch, 'Is the Reformation Over? John Calvin, Roman Catholicism, and Contemporary Ecumenical Conversations', *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (2011), p. 189; C. Ocker, 'Calvin in Germany', in C. Ocker (ed.), *Politics and Reformations: Histories and Reformations* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 313–344.
 5. 'Letter 76', in Beveridge, *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 4:276.
 6. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, pp. 58–72.
 7. The most commonly available edition of *Necessity* is found in Reid, *Theological Treatises*, pp. 184–216. This version gives only about a third of the original (see 'General Introduction', pp. 19–20). I will refer to the full version English translation published in H. Beveridge (ed.), *Calvin's Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), pp. 123–234. Numbers in brackets refer to this edition.
 8. See H. Kleinschmidt, *Charles V: The World Emperor* (Stroud: History Press, 2012), Kindle loc. 2404.
 9. Manetsch, 'Is the Reformation Over?', p. 190.

one of the most important documents of the era.¹⁰ *Necessity* provides an excellent vantage point from which to consider Calvin's view of the Reformation.

Calvin and the Reformation

Calvin positioned himself as part of the Reformation. Although the diet was concerned primarily with German issues and had no jurisdiction over the Swiss churches, let alone France, Calvin saw himself as part of the same movement as Luther and the Germans. He asked the emperor to accept his plea as if 'it were pronounced by the united voice' of all concerned for reform (124). He spoke for the movement which began when God raised 'Luther and others', who 'held forth a torch to light us into the way of salvation' and also 'founded and reared our churches' (125).

Reid (ignoring the *prima facie* addressees of the document – the emperor and the princes) classifies *Necessity* as an apologetic which makes 'the case for the Reformed faith' and seeks to convince churches of Switzerland, Germany and elsewhere to work on Calvin's proposal.¹¹ In fact, *Necessity* is more properly apologetic than Reid suggests since Calvin repeatedly summarized and addressed criticisms of the Reformers. He also presented the case for urgent change:

the question is not, whether the church labors under diseases both numerous and grievous . . . but whether the diseases are of a kind the cure of which admits not of longer delay, and as to which, therefore, it is neither useful nor becoming to await the result of slow remedies (125).

The need for church reform was self-evident; his task was to make the case that it could not be delayed.

Calvin presented reformation as a matter of piety and public concern. God was dishonoured by a church unreformed and the people were not served. He admitted that the Reformation had upset Europe, bringing dissension and church division. He argued, though, that the Reformers addressed obvious wrongs in the church and the accusation they were trouble-makers was unfair, like Ahab calling Elijah the disturber of Israel. Like Elijah, the Reformers were required to act for God's glory. They had sought agreement, not division; their opponents created the conflict (184).

10. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, p. 183.

11. Reid, 'General Introduction', in *Theological Treatises*, p. 15.

Towards the end of the document, Calvin dealt with more particular criticisms. One was that the Reformation had produced no fruit in Christian lives. The criticism, as he framed it, admitted that the church had been corrupt but asserted this could not be remedied, so the Reformation had been pointless: ‘in probing sores which are incurable, we only enlarge the ulcer.’ His response was that ‘the restoration of the church is the work of God’ and did not depend on human hopes and opinions. This was the reason they pushed on in the face of difficulty and opposition. The Reformers were bound to ‘rush forward through the midst of despair’, since the Lord required that the gospel be preached. Like Paul, the Reformers planted and watered; growth would come from God. Even if there was no obvious fruit, still reformation was required. Calvin also objected to the assessment that there had been no fruit. There had been outward changes which were to be desired (such as the end of idolatry). What was more, there were people who could testify they had learnt ‘to worship God with a pure heart . . . to invoke him with a calm conscience . . . and [had been] furnished with true delight in Christ’ (200).

It was not that the Reformation side was unblemished. There were those associated with it who perverted the gospel by indulging their passions. Calvin accused his opponents of exacerbating the problem by stopping the spread of the truth and prohibiting Protestants from establishing properly administered churches. With some ferocity, he turned the accusation back on his opponents, enumerating multiple shocking failures of discipline in the Roman church (201–209). He asserted that ‘our disorder, such as it is, will be found at all events somewhat more orderly than the kind of order in which they glory’ (206).

A further charge was that Protestantism was schismatic. Calvin again likened the Reformers to the prophets and apostles who stood against a false church. He insisted that they ‘neither dissent from the church, nor are aliens from her communion’. The question, of course, was what constituted the church? Here Calvin applied the ‘marks of the church’. Rome claimed the name of church but the true church had Christ as its head, and Christ was present by the gospel.

Our adversaries, therefore, if they would persuade us that they are the true church, must, first of all, show that the true doctrine of God is among them; and this is the meaning of what we often repeat, that is, that the uniform characteristics of a well-ordered church are the preaching of sound doctrine, and the pure administration of the sacraments (213–214).

Since Rome could not claim to be the church in these terms, the Reformers were not guilty of breaking unity with the church. It was a common faith based

on true doctrine which united Christians to Christ and so was the basis for unity in the church (211–218).

In reply to the accusation that the Reformers had no right to act, Calvin offered two points. First, the Pope had been asked to act: ‘Luther himself humbly besought the pontiff that he would be pleased to cure the very grievous disorders of the church.’ The problems were clear and demanded action, and the Pope was in a position to act. ‘He now talks of impediments. But if the fact be traced to its source, it will be found that he has all along been, both to himself and to others, the only impediment.’ On this basis Calvin rejected the idea that reform could wait until an ecumenical council (220–222). Second, the need for reform was urgent. Calvin made this point in a forceful passage.

At the time when divine truth lay buried under this vast and dense cloud of darkness; when religion was sullied by so many impious superstitions; when by horrid blasphemies the worship of God was corrupted, and his glory laid prostrate; when by a multitude of perverse opinions, the benefit of redemption was frustrated, and men, intoxicated with a fatal confidence in works, sought salvation anywhere rather than in Christ; when the administration of the sacraments was partly maimed and torn asunder, partly adulterated by the admixture of numerous fictions, and partly profaned by traffickings for gain; when the government of the church had degenerated into mere confusion and devastation; when those who sat in the seat of pastors first did most vital injury to the church by the dissoluteness of their lives, and, secondly, exercised a cruel and most noxious tyranny over souls, by every kind of error, leading men like sheep to the slaughter; then Luther arose, and after him others, who with united counsels sought out means and methods by which religion might be purged from all these defilements, the doctrine of godliness restored to its integrity, and the church raised out of its calamitous into somewhat of a tolerable condition. The same course we are still pursuing in the present day (144–145).

Worship and doctrine: the focus of reformation

Against this background, *Necessity* focused on a clutch of interrelated issues. Its central thesis was that there were two things which made for genuine Christianity – knowledge of how God is to be worshipped and clarity about the source of salvation. These, Calvin said, ‘comprehend’ the whole substance of Christianity. He went so far as to assert that ‘all our controversies concerning doctrine relate either to the legitimate worship of God, or to the ground of salvation’ (146). Much of the document outlines the case for reforming church

worship and doctrine, and giving an agenda for this reform. Secondly, he turned to the sacraments and the government of the church (126).

Calvin began with worship. One of the major themes in his theology was that true knowledge of God is grounded in and directed towards the worship of God.¹² On the one hand, piety teaches religion; on the other, it is only when people ‘establish their complete happiness’ in God that they ‘give themselves truly and sincerely to him’ – that is, genuine religion feeds piety.¹³ This virtuous cycle highlights the centrality of worship, or piety. For Calvin, the recognition of and right response to God was the central calling of human life. So it is no surprise that he gave worship the priority.

Worship is founded on the recognition that God is ‘the only source of all virtue, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life and salvation’. This drives a double response: believers thank and glorify God for everything good and they rely on him for all things. Worship consists of such adoration and prayer; ceremonies are secondary aids to this heart response. From another perspective, worship is ‘self-abasement’ – ‘denying self’ and living a life of mortification and vivification, ‘trained to obedience and devotedness to [God’s] will, so that his fear reigns in our hearts, and regulates all the actions of our lives’. For Calvin, worship is turning to God in adoration and prayer with obedience (127).

Calvin then argued that we must follow God’s rule for worship. This established God’s authority and protected the church from wandering – ‘such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray’. To add to God’s word in the matter of worship always promotes vain ‘will worship’. The term is taken from Colossians 2:23 where it translates *ethelothbreaskia*, which could be translated ‘self-willed worship’ or ‘self-imposed worship’ (128–129).

Consistent with the secondary place he gave to ceremonies and his insistence on simplicity, Calvin had relatively little to say about required changes in the form of worship, apart from stripping away illegitimate additions. The first priority was to instruct people in and convince them of ‘the doctrine of the spiritual worship of God’. Worshippers must understand God and his blessings and promises, and respond to them with conviction. The conduct of worship is related to a preaching and teaching ministry which proclaims God’s glory, makes known his perfections, extols his benefits and calls people to ‘reverence

12. See J. Beeke, ‘Calvin on Piety’, in D. K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 125–152.

13. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.ii.1.

his majesty, render due homage to his greatness, feel due gratitude for his mercies, and unite in showing forth his praise'. This proclamation and praise gives rise to dependent prayer and trains worshippers in proper self-denial and obedience (146–147).

Calvin tackled questions of statues and images and asserted, from the Scriptures and from the Church Fathers, that any veneration was idolatry, while also describing the foolish superstitions which accompany such veneration. On relics he commented that 'it is almost incredible how impudently the world has been cheated' (150). He then turned to some specific issues of practice which needed reform. The Reformers rejected the doctrine of the intercession of the saints and 'brought men back to Christ', to call on the Father through him. They also taught Christians to pray with confidence to Christ and with understanding. Calvin's argument, in summary, was that we should call only on God, that there is only one Mediator and that Christ promises that all we ask in his name we will receive. Reform would teach people these truths and ensure that believers knew what they were asking of God in their private prayers, while public prayer was 'framed so as to be understood by all' (154–159).

The concerns about worship in *Necessity* were reflected in Calvin's work in Geneva. When he first arrived public worship was being reformed, primarily by Farel, though with Calvin's support.¹⁴ Clerical attire was simplified, services and preaching were moved to the French vernacular and the extra medieval 'sacraments' were eliminated. Manetsch summarizes:

Public worship in reformed Geneva was simpler and less ornate than in the medieval church. Gone were the processions, the incense, the candles and acolytes, the monastic choirs, and the melodious organs. Instead, the reformers created a liturgy that gave priority to public prayers, the proclamation of the Word of God, and a cappella singing of the Psalter.¹⁵

During the Strasbourg years, Bucer had a notable influence on Calvin's practice of worship. Calvin used Bucer's liturgy in French with the congregation there and he explained that for the Genevan liturgy he 'took the form of Strasbourg, and borrowed the greater part of it'.¹⁶ He offered a strikingly simple

14. Gordon, *Calvin*, pp. 71–72.

15. S. M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 19–20.

16. W. D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship: Its Developments and Forms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 113–115, shows the close parallel between the

service: a call to worship from Psalm 124:8, a confession of sin and a prayer for pardon, a psalm, the prayer for illumination, the Scripture reading, the sermon, a long prayer of intercession with a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed recited and a final blessing. Compared with the medieval service, the congregation was highly involved. They were addressed at almost every point, they were expected to understand all that took place and they were required to sing and recite together. All of this was to encourage heartfelt engagement.

Calvin greatly valued the power of song to stir the heart. Introducing the liturgy he writes, 'we know by experience that singing has great power and vigor to move and inflame men's hearts.'¹⁷ The Ten Commandments and the Creed were sung on Communion Sundays. For more than twenty years he pursued the project of producing a full metrical psalter.¹⁸

The second area of necessary reformation which Calvin identified was that the church needed to teach the doctrine required for salvation. He outlined three key areas. First, people must be aware of 'individual wretchedness' produced by sin. Depravity, Calvin said, is rooted in original sin but each person needed to recognize his or her own guilt and total helplessness. Second, people must understand the fullness of redemption provided in Christ. He is 'the only priest who reconciles us to the Father' and his death is the only sacrifice which expiates sin and acquires 'a true and perfect righteousness'. Believers must not be allowed to think they contributed some part to their salvation but must acknowledge that it is all of Christ. Recognizing total helplessness and Christ's sufficiency led to the final element of resting entirely and confidently in Christ (133).

Calvin showed how Rome had obscured these truths. Both the theologians and the preachers often seemed to reduce original sin to 'bodily appetite and lust' with no awareness of 'inward depravity of soul'. From this there was a doctrine of free will which gave people false confidence in their ability, rather than looking for the work of the Spirit (134–135).

German Strasbourg liturgy, the French Strasbourg liturgy and Calvin's 1542 Geneva liturgy. See also J. W. Montgomery, 'The Celebration of the Lord's Supper According to Calvin', in J. W. Montgomery, *Christ as Centre and Circumference: Essays Theological, Cultural and Polemic* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), pp. 301–303.

17. F. L. Battles (trans), 'John Calvin: The Form of Prayers and Songs of the Church, 1542: Letter to the Reader', *CTJ* 15, no. 2 (1980), p. 163.

18. A. Heron, 'Shaping the Worship of the Reformed Church in Geneva: Calvin on Prayer and Praise', *HTS Teologiese Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012), p. 2.

The central dispute, he said, was whether justification was by faith or by works. Calvin was clear that good works were required and were accepted by God and rewarded by him; but they did not reconcile sinners to God, acquire eternal life, remove guilt or provide the grounds of salvation. Rome held that humans were tainted and weakened but, aided by God's grace, were able to contribute something to salvation. The Reformers taught that sinners had 'no ability whatever to act aright' and were only able to turn to God by the work of the Spirit.

For Calvin, Rome's teaching led people to 'plume themselves on the merit of works' and fed their pride and self-confidence. The Reformers insisted that a person was righteous before God 'because God, without any respect to works, freely adopts him in Christ, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to him, as if it were his own'. They insisted, with Paul, that salvation is all of God in Christ, with no contribution from the believer. They also rejected the Roman teaching of the need for continued confession of and satisfaction for the sins of Christians: 'we acknowledge no other satisfaction than that which Christ accomplished, when, by the sacrifice of his death, he expiated our sins.' This included a rejection of the doctrine of works of supererogation.

The Reformers valued the good works which result from justification and held that they were rewarded on the basis of God's pardon and adoption:

as we said of man, so we may say of works: they are justified not by their own desert, but by the merits of Christ alone; the faults by which they would otherwise displease being covered by the sacrifice of Christ.

The third, and related, way in which Rome corrupted the gospel was that it denied assurance, holding that believers 'ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty' about their salvation. This, Calvin pointed out, was an obvious correlate of the doctrine of justification by works – thus suggesting an indirect rebuttal of the Roman view of justification (135–137).

How did Calvin seek to establish proper doctrine in Geneva?

One of Calvin and Farel's first actions was to ensure that the services in Genevan churches were preaching services. Once he returned to Geneva, Calvin's *Ordinances* outlined a plan of two preaching services each Sunday at each of the city churches, and preaching services early in the morning on three weekdays. By 1561 there were thirty-three preaching services in Geneva each week – eleven on Sunday, and twenty-two weekday services.¹⁹

19. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, pp. 148–149.

Geneva also adopted a confession and a catechism to establish sound doctrine. The *Instruction et confession de foy* was published in early 1537 and published in Latin the following year as *Catechismus, sive christiana religionis institutio*, suggesting that it was used for instruction.²⁰ It is, in effect, a *précis* of the first edition of the *Institutes*.²¹ The shorter *Confession de la foy* seems to have been abstracted from the *Catechismus* and to have served as the confession to which the people of Geneva were expected to subscribe.²²

The *Confession* begins with a commitment to Scripture alone: ‘we desire to follow Scripture alone as rule of faith and religion’ (Art. 1). It strikes Reformation notes, even when addressing non-controversial doctrines. For instance, the article on theology proper affirms one God who is worshipped and ‘in whom we are to put all our confidence and hope’, in contrast to putting hope in or worshipping any other thing (Art. 2); and the article on the law states that there is one Lord and Master whose will, expressed in the commandments of the law, is the ‘perfection of justice’ and must be followed while no other good works are to be invented (Art. 3). It works through Reformation soteriology – the totality of sin (Art. 4 & 5) and salvation provided fully in Christ (Art. 6), including righteousness (Art. 7) and regeneration (Art. 8). Article 10 affirms that all these benefits come from God’s grace to sinners, not because of any human worthiness or merit, though works done in Christ are ‘pleasing and agreeable’ to God since they come from the Spirit. Article 11 affirms that salvation is received by faith. The next articles (Art. 12–16) deal with worship, asserting that prayer is only to God through Christ and with understanding, and giving a Reformation view of the two sacraments. The final articles deal with the ordering of the church (Art. 17–20) and the magistrates (Art. 21).²³ The *Catechismus* includes an exposition of the Apostle’s Creed to cover the content of the Christian faith and an exposition of the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. It also includes discussion of Christian hope, the ministry and excommunication.

Calvin produced a new French catechism in Strasbourg, and a similar one for Geneva in 1542.²⁴ These are more like Luther’s 1529 *Small Catechism* since they take the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer

20. F. L. Battles, *John Calvin: Catechism 1538* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1976).

21. I. J. Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 41.

22. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, pp. 25–33.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–33.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–139.

as a framework and use a question-and-answer format.²⁵ The soteriology which Calvin stressed in *Necessity* is covered in the first section. Heron gives the following summary:²⁶

1. 'Of the Faith' (Q. 1–131) – an introduction, interpretation of the Apostles' Creed, Faith, Justification, Good Works and Penitence.
2. 'Of the Law' (Q. 132–232) – interpretation of the Ten Commandments, the Command of Love and the Uses of the Law.
3. 'Of Prayer' (Q. 232–295) – interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, general teaching on prayer.
4. 'Of the Sacraments' (Q. 296–373) – instruction on the proper way to worship God on the basis of his Word, ministry, Sacraments, church discipline.

These catechisms were tools for ministry. The *Articles* called for 'a brief and simple summary of the Christian faith, to be taught to all children'. Parents were to 'exercise pains and diligence that their children learn this summary and that they present themselves before the ministers at the times appointed'.²⁷ One of Calvin's conditions for returning to Geneva was that catechizing be enforced.²⁸ The *Ordinances* provided for teaching the catechism to children in all three city churches at midday every Sunday, and every school and household was to ensure that children attended. The Council and ministers exhorted fathers to instruct their children as well as to ensure they attended sermons and catechism classes. At times the Consistory disciplined parents for their failure on this score.²⁹ Calvin and his colleagues valued family instruction, but held that the pastors also had a key role to oversee and supplement catechesis in the family.³⁰ Children had to recite the sum of the catechism and make a profession of faith before they were admitted to the Lord's Supper.³¹ The catechism itself was a teaching

25. W. Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), pp. 116–117.

26. A. Heron, 'Calvin and the Confessions of the Reformation', *HTS Theologese Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014), p. 3.

27. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, p. 54.

28. R. M. Kingdon, 'Catechesis in Calvin's Geneva', in J. Van Engen (ed.), *Educating People of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 303.

29. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, pp. 267–271.

30. Kingdon, 'Catechesis', p. 300.

31. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, pp. 62, 69.

manual and curriculum as well as a confession of faith for ministers in Geneva and students at the Academy.

The sacraments

In *Necessity* Calvin turns from worship and doctrine, the soul and life of religion, to the sacraments and the government of the church which provide its body or structure. Some of his concerns about the sacraments had already surfaced in his discussion of worship; similarly, his discussion of true doctrine highlighted the need for an effective preaching ministry.

Calvin complained that Rome ignored the distinction between what God has instituted and ceremonies devised by humans by adding to the two sacraments instituted by Christ. The sacraments alone were instituted by God to seal on the hearts of believers God's favour, to offer them Christ and testify to all God's spiritual gifts. No human ceremony had the right to do this, only those of divine appointment (165–166).

The sacraments themselves had also been corrupted, though Calvin differentiated between levels of corruption. Baptism was obscured by additions so that 'scarcely a vestige' remained, but the very form of the Supper had been changed. It had become 'a theatrical exhibition' in which the people were effectively excommunicated and the priest claimed to offer a sacrifice for sins. Calvin responded that Christ never called the Supper a sacrifice. Worse, this sacrifice was superstitiously applied to procure grace for the living and the dead. So, 'the efficacy of Christ's death has been transferred to a vain theatrical show, and the dignity of an eternal priesthood wrested from him to be bestowed upon men' (137–138).

Calvin complained that priests consecrated both sacraments with unintelligible words which resembled magic incantation, and communicated nothing of the promises and commands given by Christ. All attention was directed to the signs, not to Christ. Connected to this practice, Calvin pointed out, was the teaching of *ex opere operato*: that the sacraments would convey grace if mortal sin did not obstruct them. He also objected to the superstitious use of the reserved host, reminding his readers that the blessing of the Supper came from hearing the words of promise that people share in the body and blood of Christ as they eat and drink. Along with all of this, religious rites were sold for gain (139–140).

When Calvin laid out a programme for the reformation of the sacraments, he first insisted that the celebration of the sacraments should include the ancient custom of an explanation which directs people's confidence to Christ. The

additions to it had to be removed to return it to the original simplicity of the apostles (165–166). The Lord's Supper required greater reform. The doctrine of the mass as a sacrifice had to be denied, including any extension of the expiation of sins in the mass to the dead. The Reformers rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation and the reservation of the host. In practice they restored regular communion in both kinds and removed the many extra ceremonies, some of which 'savoured too much of Judaism', others of which 'ill accorded with the gravity' of the Supper and some of which were treated superstitiously. These doctrines, and the practices related to them, diverted faith from Christ to the elements themselves (167–169).

Calvin's concern for the sacraments was evident in his work in Geneva. The *Articles* express a desire for weekly communion which would bring great comfort since by it 'we are really made participants of the body and the blood of Jesus, of his death, of his life, of his Spirit and of all his benefits'. It would also stir the church to praise God for his grace and encourage all to live in Christian unity. Recognizing that weekly celebration brought the risk that 'this sacred and so excellent mystery [might] be misunderstood', the *Articles* proposed monthly services in each of the city churches, arranged so that communicants could attend each one if they desired. The distribution of the bread and wine was to be given to the ministers and a liturgy would be provided. The major concern was for church discipline to prevent the Supper being desecrated 'by those coming to it and communicating, who declare and manifest by their misconduct and evil life that they do not at all belong to Jesus'.³²

The *Ordinances* also regulated the sacraments. Baptism was to be administered during a preaching service and only by ministers or their assistants. It should take place at the front of the church 'in order that there be better hearing for the recitation of this mystery and practice of baptism'. Godparents were to be known to the church or 'men of faith and of our communion' so they would be able to instruct children in the faith.

The *Ordinances* still insisted that the Lord's Supper 'was instituted for us by our Lord to be frequently used'. However, Calvin now accepted that the scheme in the *Articles* would not prevail in Geneva and proposed quarterly communion in each city church on a pattern in which there would be at least one communion service in the city each month, including in each church at Easter, Pentecost and Christmas. (Even this pattern was not accepted by the Council and the final outcome was simply quarterly communion.)³³ As in baptism, the Lord's Supper

32. Ibid., p. 50.

33. Maxwell, *Christian Worship*, p. 117; Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, p. 127.

was to be served from a table beside the pulpit at the front of the church so that it was easily seen and better understood. The week before a communion service, an announcement was to be made so that children and newcomers to the city could be examined and approved to receive the Supper.

Introducing the 1542 version of the liturgy, Calvin outlined the concerns which guided his approach to the sacraments, especially a determination that the sacraments be clearly explained. The medieval practice ‘is a perverse custom’ which ‘profanes’ the sacraments and promoted superstition. In fact, the sacraments were properly consecrated ‘by the word of faith when it is declared and received’. This was Jesus’ own pattern: he did not address the bread and wine but the disciples.³⁴

The order itself was simple with the expected emphasis on explanation. The baptismal service began with a single question to the parents: ‘Do you offer this infant for baptism?’ (Answer ‘We do indeed’), and then offered a lengthy explanation of baptism signifying remission of sins and the gift of the Spirit, and of the basis of infant baptism. There followed a prayer which concluded with the Lord’s Prayer.³⁵ Parents then made promises: to instruct the child in the faith as summarized in the Apostles’ Creed as well as teaching him or her the Scriptures, and to exhort the child to keep the law, loving God and neighbour. The child was then baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. The minister was given one clear, positive instruction:

The whole is said aloud, and in the common tongue, in order that the people who are present may be witnesses to what is done (for which purpose it is necessary that they understand it), and in order that all may be edified by recognising and calling to mind the fruit and use of their own Baptism.

The instructions note that there are other ancient ceremonies often included in baptism; but they lack biblical authority and have been the cause of superstition, so they have been removed. The goal was that ‘there might be nothing to prevent the people from going directly to Jesus Christ’.³⁶

The Supper was a similarly unadorned service, following the ‘Liturgy of Word’ of the regular Sunday service. After the Apostles’ Creed, the minister was to give the words of institution, an excommunication of unworthy

34. Battles (trans), ‘Form of Prayers and Songs of the Church’, pp. 161–162.

35. Heron, ‘Shaping’, p. 4, notes that the address is five times longer than the prayer and comments that ‘Calvin was not Cranmer!’

36. Beveridge, *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 2:113–118.

communicants, a call to self-examination and an encouragement to come to the table for all who have the testimony of the Spirit. The explanation made clear that self-examination is not seeking perfect righteousness but, ‘on the contrary, by seeking our life in Christ, we confess that we are in death’. The sacrament is

a medicine for the poor spiritual sick, and . . . all the worthiness which our Saviour requires in us is to know ourselves, so as to be dissatisfied with our vices, and have all our pleasure, joy and contentment in him alone.

There is an exhortation to believe the promises in Christ, including the promise that communicants share in his body and blood; and a call to gratefulness for ‘the infinite goodness of our Saviour, who displays all his riches and blessings at this table, in order to dispense them to us’. The minister was then to distribute the bread and cup to the people as they came forward, while singing a psalm or hearing Scripture read. The service finished with a prayer of thanks and the blessing. The form finished with a brief apologetic for those offended by the simplicity of the service, arguing that the changes from the mass had not removed the sacrament but rather had ‘restored it to its integrity’.³⁷

The government of the church

The final area in which Calvin called for reform was that of church government. He complained that the office of pastor had been corrupted. Pastors should edify the church by teaching sound doctrine, but instead bishops hardly taught at all and operated as secular princes while the lower clergy offered superstitious ceremonies. Both were likely to sell their office for others to fill.

The spiritual government which Christ recommended has totally disappeared, and a new and mongrel species of government has been introduced, which, under whatever name it may pass current, has no more resemblance to the former than the world has to the kingdom of Christ (140).

His criticism was comprehensive. The problem was not that some bishops and priests failed in their duties; the failure was so general it had become the rule. Even if priests were to follow what was expected of them, they would offer superstitious ceremonies, not teaching. The corruption of their lives

37. *Ibid.*, 2:119–122.

only further undermined their ministry. Candidates for ordination were not examined for their life and doctrine; instead, clergy were appointed at a price or through nepotism or worse! To cap all this off, rather than acting as ambassadors for God through preaching his Word, the clergy had ‘a most cruel tyranny’ over the souls of the people, reinforced by the church’s claim to infallibility (141–143).

In the government of the church the first step in reformation was to return to the ancient practice that all who held a pastoral office were examined to ensure they would teach sound doctrine. Calvin applied Gregory’s maxim ‘those who abuse privilege deserve to lose privilege’ directly to the Roman hierarchy, asserting that if they wished to remain bishops they should change the ministry entirely. He dismissed concerns about the form of the ordination service, stating that the Reformation churches followed the simple biblical practice of laying hands on the candidate (170–175).

One of Calvin’s great occupations in Geneva was recruiting and training pastors. As Manetsch has highlighted, ‘the long-term success of his religious program depended in large part on the company of reformed ministers who worked alongside Calvin’.³⁸ Initially he was unhappy with his associates. He wrote to Oswald Myconius in Lucerne explaining that he needed Pierre Viret to remain in Geneva since ‘our other colleagues are more a hindrance than a help to us. They are proud and self-conceited, have no zeal, and less learning.’³⁹ Viret was recalled to Lausanne and did not move to Geneva until 1559. Calvin did, however, recruit a formidable group of preachers and pastors: Nicolas des Gallars, Michel Cop, François Bourgoing, François Morel, Raymond Chauvet, Nicolas Colladon and, most especially, Theodore Beza, were all part of ‘an impressive group of talented and well-educated French ministers who shared his reformed commitments’.⁴⁰ The *Ordinances* give some detail about both the process and the requirements for selecting ministers. Candidates were to be examined by the ministers on their doctrine, their ability to preach and their life. The ministers would then recommend a candidate to the Council for appointment. As well as recruiting these French preachers, the Academy served to train a new generation.

Calvin was equally concerned with continued oversight of the clergy: ‘as it is necessary to examine the ministers well when they are to be elected, so also it is necessary to have good supervision to maintain them in their duty.’ This was

38. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, p. 1.

39. Beveridge, *Calvin’s Selected Works*, 4:303.

40. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, p. 40.

the role of the *Congregations* in which the ministers, teachers and some interested laity met to discuss the interpretation of Scripture. The *Ordinances* instituted this weekly gathering ‘for conserving purity and concord of doctrine’.⁴¹ Each Friday morning one minister offered a commentary on the appointed text, followed by discussion and the opportunity for private correction if necessary.⁴² The ministers, including those from the rural churches, also met in private every three months for the *Ordinary Censure* to deal more directly with their lives as well as any disharmony in the company. Traditionally, this concluded with a shared meal of soup as a sign of their continued fellowship. The *Ordinances* provided a list of faults which were not to be tolerated in a minister (beginning with heresy, schism, rebellion against ecclesiastical order and blasphemy, and running through to forbidden and scandalous games, dances and similar dissoluteness, and crimes), as well as those which, in the first instance, could be dealt with by brotherly admonition (strange interpretations of Scripture, doctrines or practices, laziness in ministry, slander, avarice and too great parsimony, quarrels and contentions). The records of the Consistory show that pastors were corrected and even disciplined on this basis.⁴³

Calvin considered that this fraternal pastoral discipline was important for the church. When he heard that the ministers of the Pays de Vaud (centred on Lausanne) had been prohibited from such meetings by the Council of Bern, because they were too divisive, Calvin wrote to Wolfgang Musculus in Bern stressing their value. He admitted the risk of conflict, but advised that it could be ameliorated. Overall, these meetings were ‘an excellent institution’. Pastors who were prone to be lazy were spurred to study, and the exchange of views helped them to avoid false teaching. ‘The less the interchange of opinion, the greater will be the danger from pernicious dogmatisms. The slothful will sleep undisturbed; many will somehow or other grow godless, or become degenerate.’⁴⁴

Calvin’s concern for a well-ordered pastorate was in part because that provided proper discipline for the whole church. Most of the explicit discussion in *Necessity* is about clerical discipline, but at points he reminded the princes that this was a precursor for a wider discipline, one which was sorely needed. According to ancient synods, the task of a bishop, with assistance from the

41. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, pp. 59–60.

42. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, pp. 134–135.

43. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, p. 61; Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, pp. 127–128.

44. Beveridge, *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 5:264–265.

presbyters, was to feed the people by preaching and the sacraments and to curb ‘clergy and people by holy discipline’ (218–219).

In practice in Geneva, church discipline was a large part of Calvin’s reformation. The *Articles* highlighted to the Council the need for church discipline following Christ’s directions (Matt. 18) and the apostolic pattern (1 Tim. 1; 1 Cor. 5). Discipline ensured that Christ was not ‘blasphemed and dishonoured’, sinners were led to repentance and others were encouraged to live godly lives. They recommended that the Council appoint elders to assist with this discipline.⁴⁵ The *Ordinances* presented a detailed plan for the appointment of elders and a set of regulations for ecclesiastical discipline.⁴⁶

The right of the church to exercise discipline was a continuing point of contention between the Company of Pastors and the Council until 1555, particularly when the Council was dominated by Calvin’s political opponents.⁴⁷ Throughout these years, Calvin persisted in claiming the right of the church to exercise discipline, including excommunication.

The other area of church government is that of church laws. Calvin judged that the laws of Rome brought a ‘hard and iniquitous bondage’ which had ‘enthralled the souls of the faithful’, especially when they sought to regulate the inner life. Laws had multiplied into a confusing ‘labyrinth’; ‘some of them seem framed for the very purpose of troubling and torturing consciences’. These were enforced as if they were ‘the whole substance of piety’, while violation of God’s own law was treated lightly (144).

Calvin noted that the Reformers retained church laws which were not problematic for consciences and served good order. He refused, however, to accept that such laws could not be reformed, especially when they intruded on freedom of conscience. He particularly contested three rules – restrictions on eating meat, the requirement for clerical celibacy and the need for auricular confession. Calvin admitted that each of these was ancient, but asserted that none was the settled view of the early church and each brought spiritual damage, binding consciences unnecessarily and, in the case of celibacy and confession, requiring an impossible standard (176–183).

Calvin recognized the role of church law – hence the *Articles* and the *Ordinances*. Both of these were simple compared with canon law and were concerned

45. Reid, *Theological Treatises*, pp. 49–53.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64, 70–71.

47. W. G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, 2nd edn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 184–207; W. Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), pp. 64–89.

with the external operations of the church.⁴⁸ They provided the structures for church discipline, but little of the content. Calvin's church discipline has become notorious, and no doubt there were moments when the Consistory in Geneva overstepped the bounds. There were times when laws regulated life beyond the limits of Scripture, as when the Council ruled on what names could be given to children – banning popular options in favour of biblical names. (This law produced riots in the city.)⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is important to note Calvin's espoused view of discipline. Rather than impose church laws, he sought to apply biblical law to individuals and to do so with fatherly care, aiming for the good of the person and the church. He argued that even in the extreme cases of excommunication, discipline should be applied with 'a rule of moderation'.⁵⁰ In his view this was a biblical and evangelical discipline, radically different from the laws of Rome.

Conclusion

Necessity shows Calvin's ability as theologian and rhetorician to convey a vision for reform. His arguments are compelling and his urgency is forceful. The work in Geneva showed his ability to implement the vision. B. B. Warfield commented that Calvin's career as a reformer 'was the work of an idealist become a practical man of affairs'.⁵¹ This chapter illustrates this combination. Calvin's basic convictions about reform seem to have remained consistent as he worked with considerable patience to see it realized in Geneva.

Calvin's vision of reform rested on several interrelated theological convictions: God deserves all glory for his majesty and mercy, humans are sinners who depend fully on Christ alone for salvation, and salvation cannot be earned by works but should lead to works. On this basis, the church exists to know and live for God through his salvation and is fed by preaching and sacraments which share Christ and his promises. For this the church requires faithful pastors who will proclaim the gospel of salvation in Christ and the glory of God, and lead

48. See S. M. Johnson, 'The Sinews of the Body of Christ: Calvin's Concept of Church Discipline', *WTJ* 59, no. 1 (1997), pp. 91–92.

49. J. Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition*, 2nd edn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), p. 182.

50. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, ed. J. T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM, 1961 [1559]), IV.xii.8.

51. B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1974), p. 15.

the church in adoration and prayer. Pastors must teach and model godly living, springing from salvation, and lead the church to live that way. Calvin held that the medieval church had obscured and corrupted every element of this, and so his programme for reform was to see each element restored in unadorned simplicity. In this, he understood himself as part of a wide reformation which served God's people and glorified God.

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