

The Catholicity of Calvin in Time and Space

Calvin was a good Catholic – by which I do not mean he was a follower of Rome!

John Calvin held the Church of God in high esteem and his labours for her were as tireless and extensive as they were effective. That high regard for the Church was not narrow or insular but comprehensive and deep. It embraced the Church throughout all ages, as well as the Church as found in other countries.

We may get an insight into his thinking by considering his teaching on the church and how those thoughts were expressed in his life and writing.

Let us begin with a quote from the Institutes. It is a very extensive quote, but one which helps us gain an insight into Calvin's approach to the Church. It comes from the beginning of his Book upon the Church.

In the last Book, it has been shown, that by the faith of the gospel Christ becomes ours, and we are made partakers of the salvation and eternal blessedness procured by him. But as our ignorance and sloth (I may add, the vanity of our mind) stand in need of external helps, by which faith may be begotten in us, and may increase and make progress until its consummation, God, in accommodation to our infirmity, has added such helps, and secured the effectual preaching of the gospel, by depositing this treasure with the Church. He has appointed pastors and teachers, by whose lips he might edify his people (Eph. 4:11); he has invested them with authority, and, in short, omitted nothing that might conduce to holy consent in the faith, and to right order. In particular, he has instituted sacraments, which we feel by experience to be most useful helps in fostering and confirming our faith...

I will begin with the Church, into whose bosom God is pleased to collect his children, not only that by her aid and ministry they may be nourished so long as they are babes and children, but may also be guided by her maternal care until they grow up to manhood, and, finally, attain to the perfection of faith. What God has thus joined, let not man put asunder (Mark 10:9): to those to whom he is a Father, the Church must also be a mother. This was true not merely under the Law, but even now after the advent of Christ; since Paul declares that we are the children of a new, even a heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26).

When in the Creed we profess to believe the Church, reference is made not only to the visible Church of which we are now treating, but also to all the elect of God, including in the number even those who have departed this life... Nor is it enough to embrace the number of the elect in thought and intention merely. By the unity of the Church we must understand a unity into which we feel persuaded that we are truly ingrafted. For unless we are united with all the other members under Christ our head, no hope of the future inheritance awaits us. Hence the Church is called Catholic or Universal (August. Ep. 48), for two or three cannot be invented without dividing Christ; and this is impossible. All the elect of God are so joined together in Christ, that as they depend on one head, so they are as it were compacted into one body, being knit together like its different members; made truly one by living together under the same Spirit of God in one faith, hope, and charity, called not only to the same inheritance of eternal life, but to participation in one God and Christ.

But as it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Mt. 22:30). For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for, as Isaiah and Joel testify (Isa. 37:32; Joel 2:32). To their testimony Ezekiel subscribes, when he declares, "They shall not be in the assembly of my people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel" (Ezek. 3:9); as, on the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true piety are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem. For which reason it is said in the psalm, "Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that thou bearest unto thy people: O visit me with thy salvation; that I may see the good of thy chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation, that I may glory with thine inheritance" (Ps. 106:4, 5). By these words the paternal favour of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal.

Para 10 "... when the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard, and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time the face of the Church appears without deception or ambiguity and no man may with impunity spurn her authority, or reject her

admonitions, or resist her counsels, or make sport of her censures, far less revolt from her, and violate her unity.”

Para 12 “...even in the administration of word and sacraments defects may creep in which ought not to alienate us from its communion. For all the heads of true doctrine are not in the same position. Some are so necessary to be known, that all must hold them to be fixed and undoubted as the proper essentials of religion: for instance, that God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like. Others, again, which are the subject of controversy among the churches, do not destroy the unity of the faith; for why should it be regarded as a ground of dissension between churches, if one, without any spirit of contention or perverseness in dogmatising, hold that the soul on quitting the body flies to heaven, and another, without venturing to speak positively as to the abode, holds it for certain that it lives with the Lord?”

From these, and other statements we can see that Calvin had no thought of starting a new church, or even of re-establishing the church, but rather of reforming the existing church.

He saw himself as being part of that one great Church of all time and places, which God has established upon the earth. Some appreciation of this can be gained from considering Calvin’s expression of unity with the Church in the past and with the Church throughout the world as he knew it.

Calvin could not have any physical link with the Church in previous ages (after all there was no time travel) nor could he enjoy communication with figures from the past as he could with those among whom he lived. However, he could and did, read what they had written. He was very familiar with their writings, understood them and used them to good effect in his interaction with others of his own time.

When we consider his writings we find an amazing use of writers from earlier times.

The Early Church Fathers were a rich mine from which Calvin drew much of his material. Looking at the references in the Institutes we find Augustine leads the list – hardly surprising – with well over 300 references in over 200 articles. But he does not stand alone. We find Jerome - (34 occurrences in 29 articles), Tertullian - (19 occurrences in 13 articles), Justin Martyr - (4 occurrences in 4 articles), Ambrose - (43 occurrences in 32 articles), Athanasius - (5 occurrences in 5 articles), Chrysostom - (48 occurrences in 40 articles), Cyprian - (47 occurrences in 30 articles).

Nor did Calvin confine himself to the early church as though nothing of value was to be found in subsequent centuries or times closer to his own.

We even find him quoting a Pope with approval!

Gregory I is quoted on numerous occasions. Calvin appeals to Gregory's complaint about corruption in the church in order to back his own criticism of the state of affairs under the Papacy "The world is full of priests, and yet labourers in the harvest are rare, for we indeed undertake the office of the priesthood, but we perform not the work of the office" ... what, pray, would he have said if he had seen that very few bishops, if any at all, and scarcely one in a hundred of the other clergy, mounted the pulpit once in their whole lifetime? IV.5.12

Monks also are quoted. Bernard of Clairvaux is a favourite. In III.12.3 he is quoted in support of the teaching that it is not our merit but God's righteousness that is our salvation.

"Shall I sing of my own righteousness? O Lord, I will make mention of thy righteousness alone. That righteousness is mine also, being made mine by God," (Bernard, Sermon. 61, in Cantic). Again, in another passage, "Man's whole merit is to place his whole hope in him who makes the whole man safe," (in Psalm. Qui Habitat. Sermon. 15)

Calvin is not a man bound up to only seeing life through the eyes of his own lifetime. He had a deep appreciation for the working of God throughout the history of the Church. While he was not slow to point out faults and errors that had arisen in the past, he was not blind to the good and true that had been published long before his day. He rejoiced to stand as part of the Church of all ages.

An appreciation of the past is no reason to be blind to the present. Calvin's catholicity was no romantic attachment to ideals from the past with no anchor in everyday life. His catholicity was as evident in space as it was in time. That is, Calvin was deeply concerned about the catholicity of the Church as it was or should be expressed in the various countries of the world as he knew it.

A brief mention of his links with some of these will suffice to illustrate the point.

Consider England. Calvin wrote to Somerset soon after Edward VI came to the throne with a list of suggested practices such as instructive preaching, a catechism for children and removing the worst abuses in the Church. Most of these suggestions were adopted. He did not however, make objections to bishops.

Schaff refers to a letter he wrote to Cranmer.

"Thus he wrote, in reply to Archbishop Cranmer, who had invited him (March 20, 1552), with Melancthon and Bullinger, to a meeting in Lambeth Palace for the purpose of drawing up a

consensus creed for the Reformed Churches. After expressing his zeal for the Church universal, he continues (Oct. 14, 1552):—“

"I wish, indeed, it could be brought about that men of learning and authority from the different churches should meet somewhere, and after thoroughly discussing the different articles of faith, should, by a unanimous decision, deliver down to posterity some certain rule of doctrine. But amongst the chief evils of the age must be reckoned the marked division between the different churches, insomuch that human society can hardly be said to be established among us, much less a holy communion of the members of Christ, which, though all profess it, few indeed really observe with sincerity..."As to myself, if I should be thought of any use, I would not, if need be, object to cross ten seas for such a purpose. If the assisting of England were alone concerned, that would be motive enough with me. Much more, therefore, am I of opinion, that I ought to grudge no labor or trouble, seeing that the object in view is an agreement among the learned, to be drawn up by the weight of their authority according to Scripture, in order to unite Churches seated far apart.

The death of Edward VI, followed by the reign of Mary and the martyrdom of many English reformers, including Cranmer put an end to this plan.

Germany was another of Calvin's concerns. He always had a high regard for Luther – even when they had strong disagreements. It was a source of great disappointment for Calvin that he was not able to gain a greater measure of agreement and working together with the Lutherans.

Overall, Calvin sought a working together of the Reformed and Lutheran streams of the Reformation in Germany rather than the establishment of a separate Reformed church in the land. It was the opposition of the Lutherans that made the concept unworkable.

Naturally he had a heart for his own homeland. Calvin never returned to France, but as well as dedicating the Institutes to Francis I, he produced the first draft for the Gallican Confession of 1559 and did what he could to gain political pressure from the Swiss and Protestant German rulers in favour of the Huguenots in their time of persecution.

Something of this concern for other nations can be noted in his letters. Schaff relates the enormous volume of correspondence from Calvin's pen.

A lasting monument of Calvin's catholicity is found in this immense correspondence, which fills ten quarto volumes of the last edition of his works, and embraces in all no less than forty-two

hundred and seventy-one letters. Among his correspondents are all the surviving Reformers—Melanchthon, Bucer, Bullinger, Farel, Viret, Cranmer, Knox, Beza, Peter Martyr, John à Lasco; crowned heads—Queen Marguerite of Navarre, the Duchess Renée of Ferrara, King Sigismund Augustus of Poland, the Elector Otto Heinrich of the Palatinate, Duke Christopher of Württemberg; statesmen and high officers, like Duke Somerset, the Protector of England, Prince Radziwil of Poland, Admiral Coligny of France, the magistrates of Zürich, Bern, Basel, St. Gall, and Frankfort; and humble confessors and martyrs to whom he sent letters of comfort in prison.

This is the mark of a man who has a concern for the whole Church of God. However much the pressures of his local situation – and they were often intense and exhausting – Calvin’s horizon was always the universal Church. He could never be distracted from his purpose of serving the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” for the glory of God.

In addition to his corresponding with individuals, Calvin had a concern for some concrete expression of the unity of the whole church as far as that could be achieved.

To that end he was prepared to not only join in various colloquies and debates and meetings to further theological agreement, he was also prepared to add his signature to theological statements which did not go so far or so clearly as he would have preferred, or even where there was an ambiguity which allowed others to interpret them in a different way to that which he did himself. While Calvin worked for three years in Germany, he attended three colloquies between Lutherans and Roman Catholics and signed the Augsburg Confession of 1541. That signing was made easier by Melancthon (the original author) revising the wording concerning the Lord’s Supper. The original “teach that the true body and blood of Christ are truly present under the form of bread and wine and are there communicated to those that eat” became “teach that with the bread and wine are truly exhibited the body and blood of Christ to those who eat”.

Although Augsburg article VIII on the Church omitted mention of discipline as a true or necessary mark of the Church (as Calvin taught) it did not prevent him from signing.

How then, might we today follow the example of Calvin and express catholicity in time and space? We can separate the two themes and deal with them one at a time.

How can we express catholicity through time? One way is do what Calvin did and read the writings of those who have gone before us – early writings, medieval writings, reformation writings, 18th & 19th Century writings and so on. A few will. Most, I fear, will not. Extensive reading on any topic is not common in the Church today, let alone the reading of older works.

But there is a way. That is through our hymnody.

It is a simple but effective way of expressing our link with saints of the past to sing the songs they sang. We may need to use a translation from Greek or Latin or German, but it is one way of expressing our participation in the church universal through time. You could do worse than to incorporate the following into worship services – telling the people why!

Ambrose (339-97) “Infinite God to Thee we raise”, with its explicit Trinitarian defense in the final verse “Thy true and only Son adore, the same in dignity and power, and God the Holy Ghost declare, the saints eternal Comforter”

Theodulph of Orleans (750/60-821) “All glory, laud and honour, to Thee Redeemer King”

Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) “Jesus Thou joy of loving hearts, Thou fount of life, Thou light of men”

John Calvin (1509-1564) “I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art, My only trust and Saviour of my heart”

Horatius Bonar (1808-89) “Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face”

Stuart Townend (?-?) “How deep the Father’s love for us, How vast beyond all measure”

These are our songs, these are our people.

Ambrose and Theodulph from the 4th and 8th centuries, Bonar and Townend from the 19th and 20th – we are, with them, one church! Calvin had a sense of that catholicity which stretches through time, which we do not – and to our impoverishment.

Tackling the issue expressing catholicity in space is a bit more ticklish.

Calvin was not faced with the existence of a plethora of denominations as we are today. If the church visible is not more corrupt than in his day, it is more broken.

But we can tackle the problem in at least two ways.

First: Establishing formal & informal links and liaison where possible. The amount and degree of contact will be shaped by confessional agreement. We can shake our heads at the breadth of diversity and say it is a hopeless task. Worse still we can excuse the diversity and pretend that it is nice to have such a smorgasbord where everyone can find something they really like! Better – we can go about improving unity where we are able to do so through working together with those who are at least reasonably like minded.

Second: Taking seriously the visible church and that there is “outside this visible church, no ordinary possibility of salvation” (Westminster Confession of Faith). Those who would be recognized as Christians, must belong to Christ’s church – visibly. Do we, for example, invite to the Lord’s Supper only those who are publicly professing members of the Lord’s Church albeit in a denomination other than our own?

Taking the formal, corporate, institutional Church seriously is a prerequisite to being able to properly express its catholicity.

We belong to a great company of fellow saints. They are to be found throughout the earth today as we look around, and throughout the centuries as we look back. Reflecting on the Church as Calvin did will help us to recover something of the spirit of true catholicity. Perhaps we will also be encouraged to labour for her welfare.