**Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion***

Lesson 30: The True Church (Book 4, Chapter 1)

Note: Book 1 covered “Knowledge of God as Creator.” Book 2 covered “Knowledge of God as Redeemer.” Book 3 covered “Salvation.” Now we come to the last book which covers the external means/aids by which God invites us into “the society of Christ” and holds us therein. Book 4 covers the doctrine of the church – her government, order, and power, the sacraments, and the relationship between church and state.

**Chapter 1: The True Church with Which As Mother of All the Godly We Must Keep Unity**

*The Nature of the Church*

1. “In our ignorance and sloth (to which I add fickleness of disposition) we need outward helps to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal, God has also added these aids that He may provide for our weakness. And in order that the preaching of the gospel might flourish, He deposited this treasure in the church.” In other words, the goal of the church is to aid us in advancing in the faith until we reach the goal/outcome of our faith.
2. These aids include pastors/teachers and sacraments, all of which are found in the church and the church alone.
3. “Into the bosom of the church God is pleased to gather His sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.” “For those to whom He is Father the Church may also be Mother” (this echoes the church fathers Cyprian and Augustine)
4. “There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother [the church] 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 [Matt. 22: 30]. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah [Isa. 37:32] and Joel [Joel 2:32] testify. Ezekiel agrees with them when he declares that those whom God rejects from heavenly life will not be enrolled among God’s people [Ezek. 13:9]. On the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true godliness are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem [cf. Isa. 56:5; Ps. 87:6].”
5. We confess in the Apostles Creed that we “believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” It is called “catholic” (universal) because there is only 1 church. Calvin writes, “There could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder (1 Cor. 1:13) – which cannot happen! But all the elect are so united in Christ (Eph 1.22-23) that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together (Eph 4:16).
6. We also confess in the Apostles Creed that we believe in “the communion of saints.” Calvin writes, “Each of us should keep in brotherly agreement with all God’s children, should yield to the church the authority it deserves, in short, should act as one of the flock.”
7. “So powerful is participation in the church that it keeps us in the society of God

*The Ministers of the Church*

1. Ephesians 4:10-13 [Variety of Gifts, including Ministers]
2. “We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church. We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors. We see that all are brought under the same regulation, that with a gentle and teachable spirit they may allow themselves to be governed by teachers appointed to this function. From this it follows that all those who spurn the spiritual food, divinely extended to them through the hand of the church, deserve to perish in famine and hunger.”
3. The Lord spoke through human instruments in the Old Testament. The priests were the instructors of the people in the law of God (Malachi 2:7, Ezra, etc.). The prophets were the mouthpieces of God. So in the NT, God speaks through human instruments to His people in order to draw us to Himself.
4. “Among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.”
5. On those who reject public, corporate worship: “Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. But, since they do their utmost to sever or break the sacred bond of unity, no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions. In order, then, that pure simplicity of faith may flourish among us, let us not be reluctant to use this exercise of religion which God, by ordaining it, has shown us to be necessary and highly approved.”
6. God is the “author of preaching, joining His Spirit with it,” and He promises to bestow blessings from it. God has ordained these means through which He promises to work although He can in extraordinary circumstances work apart from these means because He is God and rightly claims this for Himself.
7. Westminster Shorter Catechism #89: **How is the Word made effectual to salvation?**

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation. (Neh. 8:8, 1 Cor. 14:24–25, Acts 26:18, Ps. 19:8, Acts 20:32, Rom. 15:4, 2 Tim. 3:15–17, Rom. 10:13–17, Rom. 1:16)

*The True Church and Not Separating From It*

1. “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists [cf. Eph. 2:20].” Later Reformed theologians and confessions would add “discipline” as a mark of the Church.
2. Calvin will begin to talk about the sin of schism (separating oneself from the church). “The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.”
3. “From this it follows that separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ. Hence, we must even more avoid so wicked a separation. For when with all our might we are attempting the overthrow of God’s truth, we deserve to have him hurl the whole thunderbolt of his wrath to crush us. Nor can any more atrocious crime be conceived than for us by sacrilegious disloyalty to violate the marriage that the only-begotten Son of God deigned to contract with us.”
4. So long as the marks of the true church are recognizable, while not perfectly, the church cannot be rejected "even if it otherwise swarms with many faults"
5. “How dangerous— nay, how deadly— a temptation is it, when one is prompted to withdraw from that congregation wherein are seen the signs and tokens with which the Lord thought his church sufficiently marked? For, in order that the title “church” may not deceive us, every congregation that claims the name “church” must be tested by this standard as by a touchstone. If in Word and sacraments it has the order approved by the Lord, it will not deceive; let us, then, confidently pay to it the honor due to churches. But again, if, devoid of Word and sacraments, it advertises the name of church, we must just as scrupulously beware such deceits.”
6. “A difference of opinion over nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians. But I say we must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions.”
7. No church is perfect as evidenced by Jesus’ parables of the wheat/tares (Matt 13:24-30), fish (Matt 13:47-58). So it’s simply an excuse when people do not go to Church because they cannot find a church perfect enough or good enough for them.
8. Consider the church at Corinth: quarrels, divisions, factions, sexual immorality in the open, disorder, abuse of gifts, etc. “What does the holy apostle— the instrument of the Heavenly Spirit, by whose testimony the church stands or falls— do about this? Does he seek to separate himself from such? Does he cast them out of Christ’s Kingdom? Does he fell them with the ultimate thunderbolt of anathema? He not only does nothing of the sort; he even recognizes and proclaims them to be the church of Christ and the communion of saints [I Cor. 1:2]! What, I ask, would those who rage with such churlishness against present-day churches have done with the Galatians, all but deserters of the gospel, among whom this same apostle still recognized churches [Gal. 1:2]?”
9. The Church of God will always have problems, but not all problems rise to the level of warranting breaking fellowship.
10. “We claim too much for ourselves if we dare withdraw at once from the communion of the church just because the morals of all do not meet our standard or even square with the profession of Christian faith.”
11. Calvin quotes the Church Father Cyprian approvingly: ““Even though there seem to be tares or unclean vessels in the church, there is no reason why we ourselves should withdraw from the church; rather, we must toil to become wheat; we must strive as much as we can to be vessels of gold and silver. But the breaking of earthen vessels belongs solely to the Lord, to whom has also been entrusted an iron rod [Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27]. And let no one so claim for himself what is the Son’s alone, that it is enough to winnow the chaff and thresh the straw [cf. Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17] and by human judgment to separate out all the tares [cf. Matt. 13: 38– 41].”
12. “Let the following two points, then, stand firm. First, he who voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the church (where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered) is without excuse. Secondly, neither the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons.”

*The Function of the Church*

1. The best way, according to Calvin, to describe the function of the church is “the forgiveness of sins.”
2. “Not only does the Lord through forgiveness of sins receive and adopt us once for all into the church, but through the same means he preserves and protects us there.”
3. “Carrying, as we do, the traces of sin around with us throughout life, unless we are sustained by the Lord’s constant grace in forgiving our sins, we shall scarcely abide one moment in the church. But the Lord has called his children to eternal salvation. Therefore, they ought to ponder that there is pardon ever ready for their sins. b( a) Consequently, we must firmly believe that by God’s generosity, mediated by Christ’s merit, through the sanctification of the Spirit, sins have been and are daily pardoned to us who have been received and engrafted into the body of the church.”
4. Christ has given the keys of the kingdom to the church and that includes the power to declare sins forgiven (Matt 16:19, 18:18; John 20:23). God alone forgives but the Church being given authority by God has the power to declare one forgiven when they profess faith in Christ or when believers confess their sins.
5. “In the communion of saints, our sins are continually forgiven us by the ministry of the church itself when the presbyters or bishops to whom this office has been committed strengthen godly consciences by the gospel promises in the hope of pardon and forgiveness.”
6. “God first establishes His church, then He extends to His people what they will continually need, the forgiveness of sins.” –J. Mark Beach