

John Calvin on Church Unity

The 19th century Canadian historian Henri-Raymond Casgrain said: "Let us make haste to write down the stories and traditions of the people before they are forgotten." What Casgrain asserted about Canadian history also holds true for the history of the church. If we no longer know our roots, we won't know where we are heading. But before we look at our roots or focus on the future, the contemporary scene should be considered.

On the one hand, most Christians in North America think denominationally. When they say, "We have joined the church," they refer to a denomination. On the other hand, much of current ecumenism is largely happening outside the institutional church. Brian Inkster, the former Canadian Director of Prison Fellowship recently said: "God is continuing to build His church, but He is doing it outside the denominations."

Historic denominations seem to have little relevance for modern Christians. Denominational loyalty is no longer a sure thing. In fact, contemporary post denominationalism has become a movement to be reckoned with. It is a vast, scattered movement of schisms, secessions, reformations, and renewals. Apparently, it includes now over 20,000 movements, networks, or new denominations with 394 million church members.

Most will agree that the Christian church should be one as our Lord meant it to be. But today there is great confusion and disagreement as to what constitutes the church and what the nature of church unity is, and how it is obtained and maintained. While churches actively engage in unity talks today the Western world is increasingly united in its intolerance of the Christian faith and the influence of the churches in society.

The church is a central article of our Reformed faith and our confessions. Martin Luther thanked God that a child of seven knows what the church is. Can be said today? How many twenty-first century Reformed Christians know what the church is? The great weakness in the present time, I believe, is the lack of attention paid to the doctrine of the church. If we want to honour our heritage and unite under one banner, we must know what the church really is. Toward that end, we can learn from Reformers. They had no intention of founding new churches in the sixteenth century. Their aim was to work for the renewal. What happened in essence nearly five centuries ago was that they wanted to go back to the early church fathers and back to the Bible. But the result was quite different from what they had expected. In every country where the Reformation took hold, its heirs can look at fragments of the church and find it nearly impossible to know where the real inheritance of the Reformation is present. They have seen their ranks divided over the centuries, many times over personal and doctrinal differences. The late Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones spoke of the endless divisions that have taken place among "men who have held to the same evangelical faith. They have divided over personality; they have divided on subtle, particular emphases." And he noted, "There is a multiplicity of denominations, and men do not hesitate to set themselves up and to start new denominations - not in terms of vital truth but in terms of matters which are not even of secondary, but of third-rate, fourth-rate, even perhaps twentieth or hundredth-rate importance."

There is also a testimony from history to the terrible dangers of denominations, which started on the right track, but gradually changed, almost imperceptible, into something contradictory to the Gospel. If a new church is built on the right foundations, we can't assume it is going to remain true always. Many denominations, which grew out of the Reformation have moved far away from Biblical authority and the fundamental doctrines of Scripture. There are, of course, other reasons for the variety of Reformed churches. For example, a survey of Reformed churches in North America shows a rich diversity of traditions, liturgies, and ethnic roots. The predominantly mainline Presbyterian denominations and their dissenting offshoots trace their Reformed heritage to Scotland and England. They also have regional traditions, from the Presbyterians in the southern and northern United States to the different Presbyterian denominations in Canada. The Dutch, German, Hungarian, Scots, and Korean Calvinists have their own unique cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

What were the crucial issues of the Reformation? The Reformers raised issues that remain live issues today - questions such as "How can I be saved?" and "How do I recognize a true church?" Although modern academic theologians wish these issues would simply go away, it is clear that they will not. Nor should they be allowed to! Although John Calvin, whose heirs we are, never lost sight of these issues. He is perhaps best remembered for a detailed exposition of the Reformed faith in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* - widely regarded as probably the most significant product of sixteenth century Protestant thought - and his wrestling with issues concerning the identity of the church and its place in public life. **Advocates of church unity appeal to John Calvin as an apostle of ecumenicity.** There is truth in the appeal. But at the same time there are limits to the appeals, which can be made to him. It may be said that John Calvin left no stone unturned in the interest of church unity. But he had no magical answer to the ecumenical problems of his day. In 1560, toward the end of his life, he was still hoping that through combined efforts Christians would overcome their differences.

Calvin's View of the Church

For Calvin there is a true and a false church. The true church is at all times faithful to the Word of God.

We do well to remember that Calvin waged a bitter struggle against the church of Rome in the name of the Word of God. But at the same time he spoke of the Church of Christ, of the universal body of the church. His view of the church is clearly stated in his *Reply to Sadoleto*, one of the classic apologies for the Reformation. In his reply to Cardinal Sadoleto's open letter to the Genevan City Council in 1539, Calvin explained why schism from Rome was necessary. He insisted that the issue was not so much ecclesiastical abuses, but the very heart of Roman Catholic thought. He defined the church as the society of all saints, a society which, spread over the whole world, and existing in all ages, yet bound together by the one doctrine and the one Spirit of Christ, cultivates and observes unity of faith and brotherly concord. And he added, "With this church we deny that we have any disagreement. Nay, rather, as we revere her as our mother, so we desire to remain in her bosom."

Calvin makes it abundantly clear that the Reformers were not out to start a new church but had attempted "to renew that ancient form of the church, which at first sullied and distorted by illiterate men of indifferent character, was afterwards flagitiously (criminally) managed and almost destroyed by the Roman pontiff and his faction." He pointed out that renewal of the church can only come by going back to the Word of God. Christ is the church's head; ours the obedience, and "ours the church whose supreme care it is humbly and religiously to venerate the word of God, and submit to its authority." Calvin's desire was to restore it to its apostolic character. He wanted a Reformation, a renewal, a purified church but not a deep division. This hope became frustrated. Positions became hardened.

Calvin emphasized the visible church. The church ought to be recognized for what it is - the people of God, the spiritual Israel, the congregation of Jesus Christ, the "city upon the hill." That is why church order was important for Calvin.

The historian Merle d'Aubigne called him "the legislator of the renovated church." His Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 developed a mature Reformed church polity. Furthermore, in Calvin's view the marks of a pure church are three: it is a place where the Gospel is preached, the sacraments are administered, and where discipline is exercised. Calvin also taught the universal priesthood of believers. And pure and simple worship was to be instituted where this was possible. He wrote to John Knox, "Nor do I see for what reason a church should be burdened with these frivolous and useless, not to call them by their real name, pernicious ceremonies, when a pure and simple order of worship is in our power." However, while striving toward an ideal order of worship, he also advised church leaders to reckon realistically with existing conditions, and not to rend the church in disputes over trifles.

Calvin and Church Unity

One of Calvin's greatest concerns was to heal the serious breaches among the churches of the Reformation. This concern should be ours as well. Martyn Lloyd Jones complained, "Can we deny the charge that we, as evangelical Christians, have been less interested in the question of church unity than anyone else?" He commented, "We are always negative; we are always on the defensive; we are always bringing up objections and difficulties. I do not think we can deny this charge." I suggest his comments should be kept in mind as conservative Reformed denominations seek unity. The latter do well to remember Calvin's movements towards reconciliation and peace not only between the Lutherans and Reformed, but among the Reformed themselves. Everywhere and always he tried to bring peace and to avoid dissension and schism. For example, he thought of the Anglican church. From a letter he wrote to Archbishop Cranmer in April 1552 we can learn of his vision of church unity. "Amongst the greatest evils of our century must be counted the fact that the churches are so divided one from another that there is scarcely even a human relationship between us; at all events there is not the shining light of that holy fellowship of the members of Christ, of which many boast in word, but which few seek sincerely indeed. In consequence, because the members are torn apart, the body of the church lies wounded and bleeding. So far as I have it in my power, if I am thought to be of any service, I shall not be afraid to cross ten seas for this purpose, if that should be necessary."

Calvin - an advocate of church union? Yes! Sadly, the image of Calvin has been deliberately distorted and maligned by centuries of slander. Of course, it is easy to fault Calvin on many counts. But there can be no question of his dedication to the cause of the Reformation, his concern for all the brothers and sisters in the faith, and his desire to be united with them in Christ's church. Goethe once commented that when we choose to find fault with a great man of the past, to be just we should do so on our knees.

Calvin and Tolerance

Should unity be achieved at all cost? Unity in service at the expense of doctrine? Amy Plantinga Pauw, Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, argues that Christian service to the world feeds a common faith, as well as receiving nourishment from it. But according to her, the historical divisiveness among Reformed Christians "stemming from unyielding demands for uniformity in doctrine has squelched opportunities for common service to the world, and impoverished their own faith in the process." She believes that "articulations of a common faith requires a tolerance, even an appreciation, for diversity in doctrine and affectional expressions." But she cannot claim support for her views from John Calvin. He called upon his fellow Christians to join him to form the church according to the prescription of the Scriptures. He pleaded for patience and tolerance for the failures and shortcomings of church members, remembering always their imperfections. But his spirit of toleration had its limits. Basic to Calvin's attitude towards of the church was his conviction that some errors and evils are intolerable. He did not compromise on doctrine, for then unity would be only apparent and not lasting. The church is not a debating society. False teachings break unity. When there is unbiblical teaching in the church, when from the pulpits things are heard which are contrary to the Scriptures and the confessions then our voices must raise in protest. But when it came to minor issues, Calvin took a quite different tack. He did not major on minors! Unity is not identical to uniformity. It does not allow division. But it does not exclude a variety of expression of one's faith.

Calvin made a distinction between fundamental and secondary matters. In the *Institutes* he argued that if Christians have any disagreement over matters which are not essential, they must not cause disorders and rebellions. He said, "I do not intend by this to support certain errors, not even the slightest ones, and I would not have them fostered by covering them up or indulging them. But I say that it is wrong to leave a church inconsiderately, on the grounds of a disagreement when that church maintains in its integrity by the principal matters which, Calvin regarded as secondary was ceremony, a frequent cause of friction and division. On secondary matters, we ought not to divide but try to help one another.

For example, Calvin urged the stern John Knox to moderate his opposition to certain ceremonies in church services, advising him that some things should be tolerated even if he did not quite approve of them.

Conclusion

The institutional church today is fragmented into thousands of pieces. How can we be agents of reconciliation in our broken world if we remain divided? How can we be a leaven in our society if we refuse to engage it with the Gospel? For the sake of the Gospel unity is

not a luxury but an act of obedience toward God. Furthermore, we need each other more than ever! Faithful churches in our time are often suffering churches. This suffering for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom should be a strong impulse towards unity. Are we willing to make sacrifices - even crossing ten seas if necessary for the sake of unity? To remain safely behind historically erected barricades may seem more secure, and a lot less risky, but the legacy of Calvin invites us to speak the truth in love and investigate the Scripture to see where agreements can be found. Calvin would rebuke those who have no interest in the unity, who are stubborn enough not to yield an inch on secondary matters. But there is always hope in the midst of all the ecclesiastical confusion of our times. As Calvin expressed it in these words:

Therefore, though the melancholy desolation which surrounds us seems to proclaim that there is nothing left of the Church, let us remember that the death of Christ is fruitful, and that God wonderfully preserves his Church as it were in hiding places; according to what he said in Elijah, "I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

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