

## Dear Friends of the Foundation:

John Calvin had a great deal to say about the unity of the church in his *Institutes*, book four, chapter one. The unity of the church is confessed and affirmed as an article of faith over and against the apparent and all too real disunity of the church. The confessed and actualized unity of the church is threatened by splits within, and by departures from, the church. So it is that much discussion of the unity of the church has to do with questions of leaving the church: Is it possible to leave the church? Is it proper or permissible to leave the church? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not?

Let me elaborate now upon what Calvin says:

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. . . .

If it has the ministry of the Word and honors it, if it has the administration of the sacraments, it deserves without doubt to be held and considered a church. For it is certain that such things are not without fruit. (IV.1.9)

That is to say, if a local congregation exhibits these realities, Calvin understands and affirms that such a congregation is a true part of the larger true and universal church of Jesus Christ. Because such a congregation is a true part of the true church, unity with and within it is to be maintained, and disunity or departure from it can only be regarded in a profoundly negative way:

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. (IV.1.10)

Calvin emphasizes the importance of these marks of the church by indicating that even a host of other negative realities cannot be allowed to count against them:

The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults. (IV.1.12)

In fact, even if these marks of the church are marred with error, as so often they are, that would not justify leaving:

Some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which do not break the

unity of faith. . . . Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? (IV.1.12)

This passage raises the issue of what is and what is not an essential doctrine and of what is and what is not a nonessential matter. For our discussion, suffice it to say that even arguments about what is essential and what is nonessential are not a sufficient reason to spurn the unity of the church:

We must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions. For in it alone is kept safe and uncorrupted that doctrine in which piety stands sound and the use of the sacraments ordained by the Lord is guarded. In the meantime, if we try to correct what displeases us, we do so out of duty. (IV.1.12)

Turning to the New Testament for an example, Calvin catalogs the vices of the Corinthians and still insists that they are part of the church:

The church abides among them because the ministry of Word and sacraments remains unrepudiated there. (IV.1.14)

After many such declarations, Calvin summarizes his teaching on the unity of and with the true church as follows:

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. (IV.1.19)

I observe two things here. On one hand, no amount of simple immorality or even wickedness provides an excuse for leaving the church. There has always been sin in the church, and there always will be sin in the church, and the church is about forgiveness. Calvin has no patience with overly strict or harsh discipline.

On the other hand, however, his definitions of the church are laced with a series of qualifiers: purely, honors, true, pure, uncorrupted, and unrepudiated. These are not rhetorical flourishes. Instead, only when these qualifiers are met is the entity being discussed a church. When these qualifiers are not satisfied, it is no longer a church with which we are dealing. This is not merely my conclusion. Calvin himself, in setting forth the true church, explicitly acknowledged the possibility of an entity claiming to be the church not actually being so:

We see what great heed we are to take. . . . [I]n order that the title “church” may not deceive us, every congregation that claims the name “church” must be tested by this

standard. . . . [I]f, devoid of Word and sacraments, [a congregation] advertises the name of church, we must . . . scrupulously beware such deceits. (IV.1.11)

Again, Calvin's definition of what it means to be the church necessarily sets forth at the same time those circumstances under which a group of people is not a church. Calvin argued strenuously for the unity of the true church. But by that very qualifier, he pointed to the reasons for the departure of the reformers from what was no longer the true church.

Grace and Peace,

*Jim*

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