

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

John Calvin, in his *Institutes*, book four, chapter ten, writes about church constitutions. We may not find that a particularly exciting topic, but he regarded it as an important one.

In short, words matter. Threats to the constitutional order of the church threaten the very existence of the church, and this danger is exacerbated in provincial denominations (see email on book four, chapter nine). We begin to see the importance of a church being well constituted as early as book four, chapter two:

However, when we categorically deny to the papists the title of *the* church, we do not for this reason impugn the existence of churches among them. Rather, we are only contending about the true and lawful constitution of the church, required in the communion not only of the sacraments (which are the signs of profession) but also especially of doctrine. . . . [W]e by no means deny that the churches under his [i.e., the Roman pontiff's] tyranny remain churches. . . . But on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church. (IV.2.12)

Moreover, Calvin continues, in such churches not properly constituted, “Christ lies hidden, half buried, the gospel overthrown, piety scattered, the worship of God nearly wiped out.” That is to say, when the church is not properly constituted, the truth is obscured, and we have already seen the importance of truth to the church (see email on book four, chapters one and two).

So it is that Calvin rails against the Roman Church constitutions as nothing more than a heaping up of traditions, ceremonies, observations, laws, and commandments (IV.10.13). These mandates for worship attempted to bind the conscience apart from and even contrary to the Word of God, and Calvin vehemently rejects them. But that does not mean that he wishes to overthrow all constitutions, for he elevates those kinds of agreed upon structures of organization that we use as constitutions today, understanding them to apply to worship, order, and discipline:

We see that some form of organization is necessary in all human society to foster the common peace and maintain concord. We further see that in human transactions some procedure is always in effect, which is to be respected in the interest of public decency, and even of humanity itself. This ought especially to be observed in churches, which are best sustained when all things are under a well-ordered constitution, and which without concord become no churches at all. . . .

Yet since such diversity exists in the customs of men, such variety in their minds, such conflicts in their judgments and dispositions, no organization is sufficiently strong unless constituted with definite laws; nor can any procedure be maintained without some set form. Therefore, we are so far from condemning the laws that conduce to this as to contend that, when churches are deprived of them, their very sinews disintegrate and they are wholly deformed and scattered. (IV.10.27; see also IV.10.29)

Calvin goes on to clarify that such church constitutions must not be regarded as necessary for salvation, cannot bind consciences, and are not to be venerated. Nevertheless, church constitutions are necessary for good order, and good church constitutions are needed for the church to exist.

Grace and Peace,

Jim

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