

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

As discussed recently, John Calvin was strongly committed to the unity of the true church. At the same time, that very commitment makes it necessary to understand what the true church is and what it is not.

This leads to the *Institutes*, book four, chapter two, where Calvin contrasts the true church with the false. It is not only the case that the church must be marked by the Word of God but also that the church must be ruled by the Word of God alone:

To sum up, since the church is Christ's Kingdom, and he reigns by his Word alone, will it not be clear to any man that those are lying words by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from his scepter (that is, his most holy Word)? (IV.2.4)

If there were a gathering of people with the appearance and perhaps even the intention of being the church, but the Word was neither reigning over them nor even present among them, there, it is not to be doubted, is no church at all.

Calvin saw as much in his day, and for such reasons, despite everything we all know he said about church unity, in fact, precisely because of everything he said about the unity of the true church, those we know as reformers were expelled from, or, as he characterized it, withdrew from, what had been, but what they judged no longer to be, the church:

Now they treat us as persons guilty of schism and heresy because we preach a doctrine unlike theirs, do not obey their laws, and hold our separate assemblies for prayers, baptism and the celebration of the Supper, and other holy activities.

This is indeed a very grave accusation but one that needs no long and labored defense. Those who, by making dissension, break the communion of the church are called heretics and schismatics. Now this communion is held together by two bonds, agreement in sound doctrine and brotherly love. Hence, between heretics and schismatics Augustine makes this sort of distinction: heretics corrupt the sincerity of the faith with false dogmas; but schismatics, while sometimes even of the same faith, break the bond of fellowship.

But it must also be noted that this conjunction of love so depends upon unity of faith that it ought to be its beginning, end, and, in fine, its sole rule. . . . Apart from the Lord's Word there is not an agreement of believers but a faction of wicked men. (IV.2.5)

Now let them go and shout that we who have withdrawn from their church are heretics, since the sole cause of our separation is that they could in no way bear the pure profession of truth. . . . It is enough for me that it behooved us to withdraw from them that we might come to Christ. (IV.2.6)

Not only did Calvin and others withdraw from what they no longer regarded as the church, but also he found it important to say explicitly that what they left was no longer a church:

In the same way if anyone recognized the present congregations—contaminated with idolatry, superstition, and ungodly doctrine—as churches (in full communion of which a Christian man must stand—even to the point of agreeing in doctrine), he will gravely err. For if they are churches, the power of the keys is in their hands; but the keys have an indissoluble bond with the Word, which has been destroyed from among them. . . . Instead of the ministry of the Word, they have schools of ungodliness and a sink of all kinds of errors. Consequently, by this reckoning either they are not churches or no mark will remain to distinguish the lawful congregation of believers from the assemblies of Turks. (IV.2.10)

If the reformers had not been willing to say that churches bereft of the Word were not churches at all, there would not have been a Reformation.

Here we come to the heart of the matter: the true church is tied to the Word of God. So let us cling to—i.e., let us read, proclaim, hear, believe, and obey—the Word of God!

Grace and Peace,

Jim

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