

## Dear Friends of the Foundation:

John Calvin, in his *Institutes*, book four, chapter nine, writes about provincial councils. Well, mostly he writes about general councils and their authority, but he has a great one-liner about provincial councils, and it occurs to me that these geographically limited expressions of the church can help us understand the nature of today's denominations.

Of the "ancient councils," Calvin professes, "I venerate them from my heart, and I desire that they be honored by all" (IV.9.1).

And yet, he is willing to be "rather severe" with them. "[H]ere the norm is that nothing of course detract from Christ. Now it is Christ's right to preside over all councils and to have no man share his dignity. But I say that he presides only when the whole assembly is governed by his word and Spirit" (IV.9.1). That is to say, any teaching even of a general council falls under, and is overruled by, the higher authority of the Scriptures. And while the authority of councils rests in Christ's promise of his presence where two or three are gathered in his name, this qualifier of "his name" disqualifies all councils which take it upon themselves either to add to, or to take away from, his Word (IV.9.2).

Calvin elaborates for some pages on the problem of councils consisting of evil pastors, and he concludes from this that we certainly must not make the mistake of thinking that the church consists of its councils (IV.9.2–7). And while Calvin willingly embraces and reverences as holy some of the ancient and general councils, such as Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, and Chalcedon, "for they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture" (IV.9.8), he goes on to show how subsequent councils have contradicted each other and were marred by serious human failings—even Nicaea suffered from accusations and "foul recriminations" flying back and forth among its participants and presented in writing to Emperor Constantine—so that Calvin finally infers this: "[T]he Holy Spirit so governed the otherwise godly and holy councils as to allow something human to happen to them, lest we should put too much confidence in men" (IV.9.11).

This critique of general councils leads to Calvin's observation about provincial councils which is of interest today: "There is now no need to make separate mention of provincial councils, since it is easy to estimate from general councils how much authority they ought to have to frame articles of faith and to receive whatever doctrine pleases them" (IV.9.22). This is downright dismissive! And while it would be anachronistic to ask Calvin questions of our denominations as a way of structuring the life of the church, his lack of regard for provincial councils provides a point of entry for us to explore the question.

If today's denominations—typically defined by geography as well as by confessions and often limited by language, race, and class—can be understood to be part of the church of Jesus Christ but not the whole of the church of Jesus Christ, should we not be as cautious of their status and of their decisions in our day as was Calvin of that of provincial councils in his day? What the church as a whole did poorly acting through its representative general councils, provincial churches did more poorly acting through their provincial councils.

Those who insist most loudly today that the denomination *is* the true church miss the mark most widely. Indeed, from what we have read today, those who would most laud the wisdom and authority of denominational “general” assemblies, which in fact are merely provincial councils of provincial churches, may be the least Calvinist of all.

Grace and Peace,

*Jim*

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