

The Church, II

Well, we have four lessons left. Today we will look again at Calvin's doctrine of the church. Next we will look at the sacraments—first at baptism and then at the Lord's Supper. Then we will look at civil government. That will take us through Book IV and complete our study of the *Institutes*.

We were looking at the nature of the church. There are two large headings there. I think I have said all I need to say about the visible and invisible church and Calvin's distinction between visible and invisible. We come today to the distinction between the true and false church. This was a very important topic for Calvin and for just about everyone in the sixteenth century as the church began to divide into Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran, Reformed, and so on. In light of these divisions, the issue of what the true church is became very urgent. We will move on later today to talk about the ministry, the officers in the church—ministers and pastors and so on. The prayer from Calvin today is a prayer particularly for pastors. We pray for faithful pastors in the words of John Calvin. Let us pray.

“O faithful Father and Savior, we commend to Thee in our prayers all whom Thou hast appointed pastors over Thy faithful and to whose guidance Thou hast committed our souls, all whom Thou hast been pleased to make the dispensers of Thy holy Gospel, that Thou wouldst guide them by Thy Holy Spirit and so make them honest and faithful ministers of Thy glory, making it all their study and directing all their endeavors to gather together all the desolate sheep which are still wandering astray and bring them back to Jesus Christ, the chief shepherd and prince of bishops, and that they may increase in righteousness and holiness every day. Amen.”

As we come to true and false church, we first need to discuss Calvin's ideas about the marks of the church. How can you tell the true church? Calvin says the true church will have two marks, and these are the criteria of a true church: “The face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes.” Calvin says that as we see these marks present, the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. The first mark is the Word of God purely preached and heard. It is absolutely necessary for that to be true for the church to be present. The Word of God must be preached. Calvin qualifies that by saying “purely preached,” which means the real Word of God. There must be correct teaching of the Word of God, and he also adds the word “heard.” It is not just the bare sermon, but it is a proper and true sermon setting forth the true meaning of the Scripture and people listening to that. I think the purpose of adding that the Word must be heard, as well as preached, is probably Calvin's concern that preaching be in the vernacular. If sermons are in Latin and people do not know Latin, then they cannot hear. It does not do them any good if they cannot understand the language, so sermons must be preached in the vernacular, as Calvin did in Geneva. He preached in French, not in Latin. He wrote in Latin and French, but he preached in French so that people could not only hear him speak, but so that they could also understand what he was saying.

As we look at Calvin's life in Geneva and the church in Geneva, we certainly see the importance of preaching. Preaching had fallen on bad times prior to the Reformation. There were not many sermons, and those sermons that were there did not treat books of the Bible consecutively, as Calvin liked to do in his preaching, so that people would be taught whole books of the Bible, and in time the whole Bible. Sermons in connection with the Catholic Mass were often just short homilies related to some text in the liturgy for that day. In Geneva it was quite different. There were three parish churches—Saint Peters, where Calvin preached, and two others—in and around the city of Geneva. At their height, there were 17 sermons a week in those three churches. So people heard a lot of sermons. In fact, it is said that practically every morning, Calvin was in the pulpit telling people that they were sinners for whom Christ

died. So they heard the Gospel every day, and sometimes several times during a day. We have about 1500 of Calvin's sermons that have been preserved. Perhaps as many as 1000 of those sermons have been lost. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the nineteenth century and perhaps even later, those sermons were being lost from the library in Geneva. In fact, apparently at one time, a librarian, not really realizing what he was doing, was using Calvin's sermons as wrapping paper to send out books to people, thinking it was just scrap paper, and a lot of Calvin's sermons were lost through that carelessness. But we have a good many of Calvin's sermons. We actually do not have all that many translated into English. We do have some. We have Calvin's sermons on the book of Ephesians translated into English, along with some of his sermons on Job and some other passages, too, but by no means do we yet have the complete corpus of Calvin's preaching available to us in English. I expect more and more of those will be translated as time goes on.

You might wonder how Calvin prepared his sermons, especially since he was preaching so often. He was preaching and he was teaching consistently. He was a preacher and a teacher, and we know what his teaching looks like because of his commentaries. When you look at Calvin's commentary, for instance, on Ephesians, and then compare his sermons on Ephesians, there is some difference, but there is not a huge difference. His preaching tends to be much like his teaching, but perhaps with a little more personal application. I do not know that we know exactly how Calvin prepared. He studied Scripture all the time, and apparently had a marvelous mind, because Calvin could teach and preach without notes. When we read his sermons, it sounds like he was reading a manuscript, but in fact he was not. Students and friends took down his sermons by a kind of shorthand that they invented. A team of them would take down his sermons and then compare what they had written down. They sometimes showed it to Calvin and sometimes did not. We have sermons on Deuteronomy that were taken down in shorthand by these students. Calvin was a student, certainly, and he was a man of remarkable mind and memory. Do not let that discourage you. Do the best you can, and develop your own style and system. We can admire Calvin for the way he was able to preach so consistently for so long and produce such quality sermons.

So the first mark of the true church is the Word of God purely preached and heard. The second mark of the church is the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution. We will come to our study of the sacraments in our next two lessons. Calvin reduces those from seven to two. The Roman Catholic Church had settled on the idea, by the sixteenth century, that there were seven sacraments. In fact, that had been settled for several centuries by then. But Calvin did not agree with that. He said there are only two biblical sacraments. One is baptism and the other is the Lord's Supper, and these should be administered according to Christ's institution. You might put it this way. The question that I said as I began—"Where is the true church?"—could be answered in different ways in the sixteenth century. The Catholic Church would answer it this way: "It is wherever the bishop is." The church is where the bishop is and where the priest is. That is the church. Some Anabaptists (in fact, perhaps most of the Anabaptists) would put it this way: "The church is where godliness is, where holiness is, where Christian living is." But Calvin's answer is that the church is where Christ is present in the preaching of the Word and in the administration of the sacraments. Where the Word is purely preached and heard, and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, there He is present in His blessing, and there is the church.

Church discipline was important for Calvin, but it was not a third mark. The Reformed tradition in Scotland and the Westminster Confession will add church discipline to the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments as a third mark. Calvin does not do that. I will speculate in a moment as to why he does not do that, but let me first of all say that discipline is extremely important for Calvin. When we think of the idea of church discipline in connection with the *Institutes*, we do not mean entirely the idea of censures or correction. Church discipline can have a more positive meaning,

which I think it should—training, helping, and instructing, as well as correcting. All that is extremely important for Calvin. It is indispensable, in fact, if the church is to maintain its true character. If you had a church preaching the pure Word of God and administering the sacraments correctly, but the church had no discipline whatsoever, Calvin said that church would soon disappear. It would no longer be a church. Thus, even though he does not have discipline as the third mark, it certainly is important to him. His favorite image or illustration of discipline is to compare it to sinews of the body. Book IV, chapter 12, section 1 is one place where he uses that image. We might say that the saving doctrine of Christ is like the soul and body of the church. The saving doctrine of Christ is the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. We will see that those two support each other. You do not have sacraments without the Word, and the Word should lead to the sacraments, because both are saying the same thing. Both are preaching the Gospel and supporting each other in the preaching of the Gospel. That is the body and soul of the church, but then Calvin says that church discipline is like the sinews that hold it together. Just like we need sinews to keep our bodies together, so the church needs discipline in order to hold together. Calvin says, “All who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church” (Book IV, chapter 12, section 1). So discipline must be present for the church to be effective, for the church to continue, for the church to be ensured that the efficacy of the Word and the sacraments will continue.

But why not make it a third mark? Calvin does not say this in so many words, but I think perhaps the answer, in Calvin's thinking, is this. Later Reformed theology added discipline as a third mark. In fact, I was reading Donald MacLeod, the Scottish theologian, in a book called *Faith to Live By*. Donald MacLeod says that you could have a fourth mark, which is compassion for the poor, or charity. He sees this in the development of Knox and Melville in the church in Scotland. He says you could also have a fifth mark, which is worship, which he sees at least hinted at in the Westminster Confession of Faith. But Calvin has two marks, and I think the reason that he does not include discipline as a third mark is that the preaching of the Word and the giving of the sacraments are sheer objective elements in which the grace of God is given to us. That is what makes the church the church. God's grace is offered to us. It is poured out on us in sheer objective manner. Discipline is a kind of subjective response to that grace. In other words, we learn, we hear, we obey, we are corrected. This is very essential for the church and, without discipline, the church would not long exist, but there is a kind of difference between the sheer objectivity of the two marks and our human response, which is urgently important but is not the same as grace.

If you are wondering when church discipline became a third mark, that had already happened in the sixteenth century. By the time we come to John Knox, he has made church discipline a third mark. It certainly is present in the seventeenth century in the Westminster Confession of Faith. But there is kind of a fine line there. In Calvin you want to say that there are two marks, but discipline is so important that it is very close to being a third mark. He does not quite elevate it to the same level where he wants to place the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. As we will see later, those two elements are really two parts of the same thing, and that is the offering of the good news, the Gospel of God's grace, to us.

As we look at discipline, we can go through this pretty quickly, because this is well-known, but let me just mention these things. There are two elements I want to look at: aims and steps. Calvin has three aims in discipline. Here he is thinking more of the corrective aspect of discipline. The first is that it preserves the honor of God. The church is Christ's body, and His honor is at stake, and discipline must be exercised in order to preserve His honor. Second, it protects the good from the wicked. We are easily led astray by bad conduct and bad examples. If the church does not deal with wicked actions, then that will contaminate others in the church. Third, it leads (one would hope) the offender to repentance.

Calvin's purpose in discipline is not just to punish. It is not really to punish at all. It is to correct. It is to cause the person to see the error of his or her way and to repent and be restored to the full fellowship of the church. However, in this list, Calvin typically begins with the honor and glory of God and ends with the welfare and good of people. We can see discipline serving both functions—to glorify God and to help those in the church, both by protecting some from the sins of others and also by bringing those who are guilty of specific sins to repentance.

Those are the aims of discipline. Now let us talk about the steps. The first step is private warning. Calvin is simply following New Testament instruction here. Private warning is first. If it is not heeded, then the second step is public admonition. That would be either before the entire church or with a group of elders meeting with the individual. The third step is exclusion from communication, that is, from Holy Communion.

Most of the acts of church discipline in Geneva involved suspension from one communion. Plenty of this went on. Between the years 1557 and 1560, there were an average of at least 200 excommunications a year in the three churches in Geneva. We very seldom hear of an excommunication today. Occasionally, someone is excommunicated in one of our churches, but 200 excommunications a year shows the seriousness with which the leaders of the Geneva church considered church discipline. The extent of excommunication, though, was generally to be suspended from one communion, and there were four quarterly communions in Geneva. So a person was excommunicated, which meant that a person could not partake of communion for one time or sometimes two times. It was occasionally as many as four times, but it was generally one time. That did not mean the person could not come to church. In fact, the person was required to come to church, as was everybody else in Geneva. If you were excommunicated for something, it meant that on that one communion Sunday you were not allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper. That became quite an issue in Geneva, because Calvin felt that the church itself should have the ultimate responsibility of saying who could take the Lord's Supper and who could not, but the civil leaders in Geneva felt that the state should have the last word in excommunication, as was true in many other parts of Protestant Europe. Calvin insisted on the freedom of the church to decide this issue. On one famous occasion, there was a man, one of the leaders of the state, who had been excommunicated by the leaders of the church. He insisted he was going to receive the Lord's Supper anyway, and Calvin wrote that if he did, that he (Calvin) would stand in front of the table and physically prevent this man from taking the Lord's Supper if necessary. Fortunately, the man did not show up. I am not sure what would have happened if he had. Calvin was not that strong of a person, and it could have been a disaster, but you can see Calvin's concern that that it is not the state but the church that must decide this issue.

You might wonder whether there is a distinction between excommunicating someone and simply barring the person from the elements. Is excommunication a step beyond forbidding someone to receive the Lord's Supper? Excommunication means you are out of fellowship with the church so that you cannot communicate, which means to receive the Lord's Supper. In Geneva, that could be for one observance of the Lord's Supper. Now in hardened cases, where there is no repentance, then that excommunication can become more permanent, and then the civil magistrates in Geneva became involved with regard to what punishment would be meted out to hardened offenders, but generally in Geneva it was for a shorter time. There would have to be repentance. There would be excommunication for one time, and then the consistory would continue to meet with the individual. If there was not repentance, that suspension from the Lord's Supper would be continued for another time until there was repentance, or until it seemed clear to the consistory that there was a kind of final rejection. Then punishment from the state would ensue. That was something that took place in the sixteenth century that we would not agree with, of

course, that the state would have the right to decide the ultimate penalty. The penalty could be to be barred from the city, and there were even more extreme cases.

Calvin's insistence on church discipline is the primary reason why Calvin was barred from Geneva for three years. There were a number of reasons why he was expelled and had to go to Strasburg, but I think the primary reason was his insistence on church discipline. When he arrived in Geneva in 1536, Calvin said that there were sermons, but that was all. Farel was there, preaching sermons, but there was really no organization of the church and no discipline. Of course, Calvin felt that that was wrong, and he moved to create a church system where there would be discipline. I think Calvin was right in doing that. He may have tried to move too quickly and alienated people unnecessarily, rather than bringing them along slowly and carefully. That was the basic reason why he was expelled, but then three years later, the Genevans realized that they needed something like what Calvin had suggested. It was really not until 1555 that the consistory (that would be like the presbytery) attained the right to have its sentence of excommunication recognized as final. There was a struggle between the councils and the consistory, between state and church, until 1555, and you might say Calvin finally won his long battle at that point.

Let us move on now to the next point in the outline: "As long as the church retains its marks, we must not reject it, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults." Calvin says there are the two marks, and discipline is close, but for reasons that I already suggested, it is not a third mark. As long as the Word is being preached and people are hearing it and the sacraments are being correctly administered, that is a church. It is not a perfect church, but it can be considered a true church, even if it swarms with many faults. When Calvin begins to describe what the faults are, he tells us, first of all, "There may be some fault in doctrine or sacrament" (Book IV, chapter 1, section 12). Calvin does not require a church to be perfect in its doctrinal teaching or in its sacramental administration to be a true church. The fault in doctrine, Calvin says, has to be in non-essential matters. You cannot have a church that had gone astray into some major heresy. That church that was preaching that heresy could not be considered a true church, but there may be "some fault in non-essential matters." That is Book IV, chapter 1, section 12, and then Calvin begins to list what he thinks are necessary doctrines: "God is one." You have to believe in the oneness of God and that there is one God. "Christ is God. Our salvation rests in God's mercy." Then you hope he will go on and complete the list, and he says, "and suchlike." So we do not have Calvin's authoritative list of what are the essential doctrines. Certainly the three that he lists are essential. He lists the doctrine of the unity of God, the oneness of God, the deity of Christ, and salvation by grace, we would say, but he does not say that is all. He says, "and suchlike," so we are left to wonder what else should belong in that list. Calvin says a church may make some mistakes in some areas of its teaching and still be a true church, but it has to be a non-essential area, whatever that means. We know part of what it means, from Calvin's words here, but we do not know completely what it means, at least from his point of view. What do we do then, if we are in a church like that? "We must try to correct what displeases us" (Book IV, chapter 1, section 12). We do not abandon the church. We work as hard as we can to correct what displeases us. There may be some fault in doctrine or sacrament, and there certainly may be—and we would almost say will be—"imperfections of life." That means that people will not be living the way Christians ought to live. You cannot just say about a church where there is the pure preaching of the Word and proper administration of the sacraments, that you do not like the church because the people are too worldly.

You might wonder how we judge whether it is time to leave a particular church. Calvin did leave a church. But now as he thinks about what a true church is, he is thinking about the Protestant church, maybe even the Reformed church, but probably more likely the Protestant church. We will see later that Calvin signed the Augsburg Confession with its Lutheran statement on the Lord's Supper. So I think Calvin would have said that a difference of opinion on the presence of Christ in the elements is not

adequate for breaking fellowship with a church. He did leave a church, but I think he would say there—in fact, he does say there—that the necessary doctrines were not being taught. God's salvation through the mercy of Christ alone was not being taught, so the Catholic Church was not a church in which there was some fault in doctrine but a major fault in doctrine. In fact, Calvin says, "We left them in order to come to Christ." They could not remain Catholics and be Christians. So that is a major issue, but I think this would apply more to our being in a church, getting unhappy with that church, and then leaving it because some teaching does not please us or some people are not behaving the way they should. Calvin would say that you cannot do that. We leave churches for even less significant things, do we not? We do not like the new color of the paint in the Sunday school building, and so we leave. People kind of wander about all the time. That is more of a modern phenomenon. I think it was a problem in Calvin's day, too, although people did not have the flexibility that they have today to change churches or change denominations so quickly and easily.

Calvin goes into this matter of imperfections of life. I will not go through all these references that I have given you, but I will look at just one or two. Calvin says to look at the church in Corinth. There were a lot of problems in Corinth. When we read Paul's correspondence with that church, we find that there were all kinds of pretty major problems there, and yet Calvin says, "The church abides among them." Paul was still calling that a church, "the church in Corinth," even though it was a church that had some major imperfections of life. Look at the church in Galatia. There was some serious falling away in doctrine there, but Calvin says, "Paul still recognized churches among them." He was thinking of the whole province where there would be a number of churches, not just one congregation, in the region of Galatia. So there may be some fault in doctrine and some imperfections of life. I think that Calvin is here primarily opposing the Anabaptists. He calls them "airy spirits." The image is of almost an angelic kind of people who float above the earth and do not really live on this ground where we live, because the Anabaptists were seeking a perfect church, a pure church, a church without sin and without error, and Calvin was sure that they would never find it. He says, "In the creed"—that is, the Apostle's Creed—"forgiveness of sins follows the church." The creed says, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins..." So what Calvin makes of that is that the church is full of sinners. We exist as a communion of saints, but we also exist as people who are sinners who have to ask constantly for God's forgiveness and for the forgiveness of each other.

Let us come next to a comparison of the false and the true church, because Calvin becomes somewhat detailed here. He sets forth two levels of false churches. A church can be a false church. A true church is a church where the Word is preached and the sacraments are properly administered, but there are some churches where that is not true. We call those false churches, but when Calvin comes to thinking of what a false church is, he wants to make a distinction here. First, he talks about churches that lack lawful form. The marks are missing. Christ is absent. This would be a description of the Roman Catholic Church, which is a false church, but Calvin is not willing to go so far as to say that it cannot claim the name of church. It is a false church because it lacks the lawful form, but there are certain degrees here, because you can go from false church, lacking the lawful form, to no church at all. As Calvin looks at the Roman Catholic Church, it is somewhere between lacking lawful form and no church at all, but he is not willing to say that it is no church at all. Catholics, of course, would say of the Protestants that they are no church at all. They would say we cannot use the name "church." In fact, you know, the modern Catholic Church, even in this ecumenical age in which we live, still refuses to call the Protestant church "the church" because there is only one church, and that is the Catholic Church. The two words that they use for us are "ecclesial fellowships." We have ecclesial fellowships, but the Catholics alone have the church. But as Calvin looked at the sixteenth century, he said that the Catholic Church lacks the lawful form, but he was not willing to go as far as saying that it was not a church. The marks were missing, and Christ was absent, so Calvin separated from the Roman Catholic Church, or as he put it, "they have

expelled us.” He did not see himself so much as having left the church as he saw himself as having been expelled from the church. He says, “It behooved us to withdraw from them that we might come to Christ.” That is a pretty strong indictment there. The marks are missing. The Gospel is not being preached. The sacraments are not properly administered, because Mass, for reasons that we will see next time, cannot be considered a true celebration of the Lord’s Supper. As a result, there is idolatry right in the heart of the church in the worship of the transubstantiated elements. Christ is absent. The presence of a pope symbolizes the real absence of the church’s head, not the presence of the church’s head. The pope is the head of the church, and the presence of the pope takes the place of Christ. So it is no wonder that Calvin separated from the Roman Catholic Church. He says, “Apart from the Lord’s Word, there is not an agreement of believers, but a faction of wicked men. So if you do not have unity around the Word, then you do not have a church. You do not have an agreement of believers, but you have a faction of wicked men.

Calvin’s treatment of his understanding of the requirements of the true church—that would be the first four chapters of Book IV—is followed by arguments that the Roman Catholic Church is not a true church in Book IV, chapters 5 through 11. We have not read all of that, but in Book IV, chapters 5 through 11, Calvin argues in great detail that the papacy itself is directly contrary to church order. He gives biblical, historical, theological, and moral grounds. Someday you may want to go through all of that, but we will not do it for this class. Calvin does set forth in great detail reasons why he considers the Roman Catholic Church no longer a true church. This section demonstrates Calvin’s considerable ability in church history. As we go through the *Institutes*, we see Calvin using church history from time to time, but in these chapters, which we are not reading, he really delves into church history in a great deal of detail and shows skill there for a sixteenth-century scholar. He also shows his considerable ability in invective, because Calvin’s polemic becomes as strong in these chapters as anywhere. Sometimes he certainly overdoes it in the words that he uses and the thoughts that he uses to denounce the church. But as strong as Calvin is in all of that, he insists that “traces”—that is the word he uses in Book IV, chapter 2, section 11—of the church still remain in Catholicism. He denies that the Catholic Church is a true church, but he does not go so far as to say that there are no traces left. In fact, he says in Book IV, chapter 2, section 12, “They are still churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of His people.” Calvin argues that as long as they maintain baptism and other vestiges, they can be viewed as churches. Baptism is still practiced in the Catholic Church in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is not clear what the other vestiges are, but Calvin does see something still there in the Catholic Church, although he in one place describes it as a kind of trash-heap or dung-heap with just a little flicker of life or a flicker of a flame still alive in the midst of all that is bad.

Well, we come next to the doctrine of the church in terms of its order. We will look at church order, or the ministry of the church. Here Calvin says, “Scripture reveals an order of permanent validity.” We have in the Bible, not only the doctrine of the church, but also the order of the ministry of the church. Calvin is different from Luther at this point. Luther did not spend much time thinking about or writing about ecclesiastical organization, which to him depended almost entirely on circumstances. He was willing to allow the state and the princes to control and to determine the outward structure of the church, as long as ministers were free to proclaim the Gospel in the church. For Calvin, however, “the order of church government,” as he says in Book IV, chapter 4, section 1, “has been handed down to us from God’s pure Word.” There is an order. It is not open to us to create just any order or polity, but we must obey the order that has been handed down from the Word of God. But having made that point, Calvin also says that Scripture gives us considerable freedom within the proscribed order of the Word of God. As Dr. McNeill puts it in our copy of the *Institutes*, in one of the footnotes that accompanies Book IV, chapter 10, section 30, “Calvin sets forth a sensible freedom in secondary matters.” Calvin says, “God did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to proscribe in detail what we ought to do, because He

foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and He did not deem one form suitable for all ages.”

So God has not given us a church polity in precise detail that cannot be changed, because times change, situations change, and circumstances change. From time to time, it is necessary and permissible for us to change what we do and how we see the church and how the church is organized. Here is Calvin's commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:40: “The Lord allows us freedom in regard to outward rights in order that we may not think His worship is confined to those things.” We have freedom in outward rights. We can change and vary our worship and do it differently, because His worship is not confined to the precise way in which we do these things. Calvin goes on to say, “However, he has restricted the freedom in such a way that it is only from His Word that we can make up our minds about what is right.” So we have freedom, but it is restricted freedom. We cannot just do anything. We have the Word that enables us to decide what is right. Sometimes we call this the regulative principle. You are familiar with that phrase. It means that in our worship we can only do those things that the Bible commands. I think we can use that expression for Calvin, but it seems to me that perhaps an even better way to think of it is a directive principle. Scripture directs more than it regulates. In other words, we have the Scripture, which directs us as to how we should think about things, but then, as Calvin says, “God has restricted the freedom in such a way that it is only from His Word that we can make up our minds about what is right.” That is directive, not regulative, you see. The idea of the regulative principle is an important one, and it is a very difficult one to apply through church history. Reformed people have struggled with it all the way down through the present. It may be good for us to think of it more in terms of directive, but that is a matter we could probably spend a lot of time on.

Calvin says that we can use our freedom, but love should be our guide. He wants to avoid rash, sudden, and unnecessary changes. Book IV, chapter 10, section 30 says, “If we let love be our guide, all will be safe.” That is a kind of a practical, pastoral word. It is a good word for you to remember as you go into a church and want to change something. If it needs to be changed, let love be your guide. That means that you will not do something suddenly, abruptly, and without preparing the people for it. You see, this is the older, more mature, more experienced Calvin talking now, not the young man who went to Geneva in his twenties and tried to change things pretty quickly and got expelled. He is wiser and more cautious now, and I think properly so. Calvin does talk about the importance of decorum, dignity, and propriety. I will not go through all of that, but this is another theme. We have freedom, but we should use that freedom bounded by love, and whatever we do should be marked by decorum, dignity, and propriety. It has almost become a Presbyterian rule, has it not? We do things with dignity and decently and in order. Calvin was concerned about all of this, too. Commenting on the text of 1 Corinthians 14:40, “Let all things be done decently and in order,” he says, “Paul sums up everything he has set forth concerning the external organization of the church with this statement. Seemliness should be preserved and disorder should be avoided. This statement shows that he was not willing to put people's consciences under obligation to the instructions he gave above, as if they were binding for their own sake, but only insofar as they make for seemliness and peace.” So some things we do in the church we do for the sake of order, decorum, peace, and propriety, not because those are absolute rules that cannot be broken in any circumstance or situation.

Calvin finishes this section with the importance of peace in the church. We have a church order. It is given to us in the Scripture. It has permanent validity. It is directive in that it shows us what we ought to do, but within the parameters of that church order, we have a great deal of freedom to move and to change things, but we should always be guided by love, by decency, and by a sense of the importance of peace in the church.

We will begin talking about church offices and conclude this next time. The head of the church is Christ. Book IV, chapter 3, section 1 says, "He alone should rule and reign in the church." So there is no pope. Christ reigns in the church. Christ alone should reign in the church. I remember when the PCA was first being formed, we debated about the issue of where to locate our various agencies. We had our committees in different cities at first. Mission to the World was in Atlanta, and Mission to North America was in Montgomery, and Christian education was somewhere else. We were fearful of a kind of a church hierarchy, so we spread things out. Then we decided that was not a good idea, because these agencies had to work together and it would be better to have them at least close together, so we started talking about locating all the agencies in one place. That debate went on for a few years. Atlanta was always a leading candidate. It seemed for a while that Saint Louis was a possibility. Those offices might have been located here, because the seminary was here, but we talked about it a good bit, and one General Assembly—I think the one in which we voted to move our offices to Atlanta—people were talking about our headquarters being Atlanta. Dr. Morton Smith had had about enough of that, so he stood up and reminded us that "our headquarters are in heaven," he said, "not in Atlanta." That is another way of saying what Calvin says here, that we do not have an earthly head. We do not have earthly headquarters. Christ is head of the church. But Christ works through the ministry of men, "just as a workman uses a tool to do his work," Calvin says in Book IV, chapter 3, section 1, "or as a sort of delegated work." So it is Christ who is working, but he is using people as a workman would use a tool. He is using us in a sort of delegated work. In his commentary on Malachi 4:6, Calvin says, "God connects Himself with His servants, but He never resigns to them His own office." The ministry of the church is connected to God, but we do not take over His office as the chief pastor of the church. That remains unviolated.

Why does God do this? That is, why does He use human instruments? Why do we have pastors who are people like us? Calvin gives three reasons. The first reason is His regard for us. In Book IV, chapter 3, section 1, Calvin says, "It shows the significance of human beings that God takes some to serve as His ambassadors in the world, to be interpreters of His secret will, and to represent His person." The fact that God will reach down and call some to be His servants shows His regard for the significance of human beings, that He would choose to use such as us as His servants and ministers in this world. Second, it is an exercise in humility. It helps all of us to be humble. We receive God's Word from a human being just like us. In fact, Calvin says, the minister may excel us in nothing. He might not be as smart as we are or as well-placed in society as we are, or a lot of other things we could say, but he is the preacher. He is the one whom God has chosen to set forth His Word, and that fosters humility. We listen, expecting to hear and to learn God's Word from a person who, humanly speaking, is below us in a lot of ways. We must apply this in our own thinking. I think there are some outstanding preachers of whom we may say, "Well, I can never reach that level of intelligence or ability to speak or anything else," but sometimes we hear people who are just rather simple, ordinary people. We might be tempted to think, "Who is that, that he should be preaching and I am the one listening and learning?" I think there are occasions for us to experience humility there. The third reason is that it fosters mutual love. "The human ministry is the chief sinew by which believers are held together in one body, because God has deigned to work through human beings, not through angelic beings, and we are all alike in the church." We are all human beings, from the pastor to the youngest, smallest baby baptized in the church, there is that community. It is the human ministry that is the chief sinew by which believers are held together to be one body. We are dependent on each other for the very words that promise eternal life, and we can hardly be more closely bound up with one another than we are in the church.

Those are Calvin's general comments about church offices. We will have to look at the specific offices next time—apostles, evangelists, prophets, which he says are temporary or extraordinary, and then pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons, which are permanent and ordinary. We will also have a word

about bishops and a comment on the role of women in the ministry of the church. That is all for this lesson.