

The Church, I

We will turn to Book IV today, but before we do so, let us look to the Lord in prayer. As we do each class, we will use a prayer from John Calvin. Let us pray.

“Enlighten us, O God, by Your Spirit, in the understanding of Your Word, and grant us the grace to receive it in true fear and humility, that we may learn to put our trust in You, to fear and honor You by glorifying Your holy name in all our life, and to yield You the love and obedience which faithful servants owe to their master and children to their fathers, seeing it has led You to call us to the number of Your servants and children. Amen.”

Before we get into the beginning of Book IV, I would like you to look at the outline in your syllabus on Book IV. Let me just alert you to what is coming. The title of Book IV is “The External Means [or Aids] by Which God Invites us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein.” In my copy of the *Institutes*, the page that introduces Book IV says “aids” but on page 1011, it says “the external means, or aims.” If you have the same edition, you should know that that word “aims” is a mistake. It is just a misprint, and I keep thinking they will correct that. You should change it to “aids” as it is on the preceding page.

In a few minutes, I will dissect that title in some detail. As Calvin begins Book IV, in section 2, he gives his own summary statement of what is coming: “The church, its government, orders, and powers”—Calvin will discuss the church’s government, its ministry, its polity, and its powers, the authority of the church—“then the sacraments, and lastly the civil order.” In that brief phrase, Calvin sums up what is coming in Book IV.

Here is a kind of outline of Book IV. The first two chapters deal with the true and the false church. We will look at that in this lesson. Then chapter 3 deals with church officers, or ministers. Chapters 4 through 11 deal with church government. In chapter 4, Calvin looks at the ancient church, the early church, and explores how the early church was governed. Then in 5 through 11, he looks at the papal church, the Roman Catholic Church. We will not go into those chapters in detail, but we will just refer to them briefly. Those chapters do, however, reveal Calvin’s rather considerable knowledge of church history. We know that Calvin was able in a good many fields, but he is generally not thought of as a church historian. As you read chapters 5 through 11 in Book IV, you will see Calvin’s skill in the discipline of church history. Then chapter 12 deals with church discipline, which is the power of the church. There is a chapter on vows, which is primarily a critique of Roman Catholic monasticism. Then chapters 14 through 19 are on the sacraments. Chapters 14 through 17 are on the true sacraments, the sacraments that Calvin views as valid—that is, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Then chapters 18 and 19 are on the false sacraments. They contain Calvin’s critique of Mass and the five other ceremonies that the Roman Catholic Church considered sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church had seven sacraments then, as they still do today, but Calvin accepted only two of those as scriptural sacraments. Those two, of course, were baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Then the final chapter is on civil government. That is quick look at what is coming in Book IV.

We will come today to the beginning of Calvin’s treatment on the church. Let me just make some introductory remarks about this, and then we will see how this material relates to the first three books. Calvin is viewed, of course, as a reformer of the church. One of the more recent biographies of Calvin (by no means the most recent, but fairly recent) is the book by T. H. L. Parker on Calvin. It is simply called *John Calvin: A Biography*. In that book, Dr. Parker said that as he had been writing the book, Calvin had more and more taken on the character and stature of a “doctor of the catholic church.”

Parker, looking at the life of Calvin, sees him as a churchman, a doctor of the catholic church. That does not mean the Roman Catholic Church, but rather the universal church. We will look at Calvin's reasons for leaving the Roman Catholic Church and explore that theme a bit further, but Calvin was a reformer of the church. As you know from his biography, his life story, that was not his initial goal. Calvin did not plan to be a reformer of the church. In fact, he was very reluctant to be cast in that role.

You remember the famous incident when he came to Geneva. It was August 1536. He was a refugee from France. He had decided that it was necessary for him to leave France, and he had good reasons, because his life was in danger. He wanted to go to Strasburg to pursue a scholarly career. He had already written a couple of books. They had not yet been particularly influential, but he had some experience with scholarly life, and apparently he liked it and thought that was what he wanted to do. However, he was forced to make a detour to the south because of the war that was going on between Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor, and Francis I, the king of France. That made it impossible for him to go directly from Paris down to Strasburg, and so he kept going south and passed through Geneva. This is sometimes called the "divine detour," because God certainly had a hand in all of that. There he met William Farel. William Farel was a very fiery reformer. Somebody has called him a "hot gospeler." He was preaching in and around Geneva. Parker, in his biography of Calvin, said that "Farel would act while angels debated." He was a man who did not wait. He discovered Calvin's presence in town. Calvin gives an account of this in his preface to the Psalms commentary, which he wrote late in his life. This is about the only place in his writings that Calvin ever talks about himself. We do not have a lot of personal biographical information directly from Calvin, but we have this from the preface to the Psalms commentary. Calvin, thinking back to 1536, said that what he really desired was to continue as a kind of private scholar. In fact, the more recent book that he had written, which was the first edition of the *Institutes*, had come out in 1536, the same year that Calvin appeared in Geneva. It would go on to be quite a sensation. Calvin wanted to give his life to the cause of writing books and studying. He said, "That was my plan until Farel detained me at Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation as by a dreadful curse, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid His mighty hand upon me to arrest me." In another place, Calvin says, "God thrust me into the game." It was as if he was kind of on the sidelines until this happened. When Farel discovered that Calvin was not really eager to help him and was determined to go on to Strasburg, in Calvin's words, "He proceeded to utter the imprecation that God would curse my retirement and the tranquility of the studies which I sought if I should withdraw and refuse to help when the necessity was so urgent."

Well, I am not recommending Farel's tactics there of giving guidance for someone else, especially in the rather strong words that he undoubtedly used, but it worked in Calvin's case. In fact, Calvin says this: "By this imprecation, I was so terror-struck that I gave up the journey I had undertaken." Calvin was a sensitive person, and to have that blast coming from Farel was more than he could handle. So he stayed in Geneva, and that really committed him to his life's work. Although he would be expelled from Geneva, with Farel, for a few years, he would come back three years later. His life's work was set now as a churchman, the pastor of a church, a preacher, and a person involved in the reform of the church. Interestingly, he was still able to write books. However, the books were, I am sure, quite different from what he would have produced if he had been able to retreat to a kind of ivory tower. I think it is Parker who says that Calvin wrote the *Institutes* against the background of "teething trouble." As he was writing, there were babies crying in the house. They were not Calvin's own babies, because the only child he had, his and Idelette's son, died almost immediately after birth. Calvin had family living with him in Geneva—sisters, brothers, and others—and their children were there crying. So Calvin was not in the ivory tower, but he wrote the *Institutes* as a busy pastor in a hectic household, with all the pressures facing him that face pastors today, and even more.

As we think of Calvin's life, it is astonishing how he was able to get so much done, and yet he did. So he became a pastor. He did go on to Strasburg, and that was a very important time for Calvin. John T. McNeill, in *The History and Character of Calvinism*, writes, "Calvin's Strasburg period was much more than an interruption of his activities in Geneva. Both church and school had much to teach him, and he was in a mood to learn." The Reformation in Strasburg was already advanced under the guidance of Martin Bucer. Bucer became a kind of mentor to Calvin, in those three "golden years," as they are called, that Calvin spent at Strasburg. Calvin learned much from Bucer, although I think what he learned was not so much theology as it was practical ministry skills. Calvin had already written the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, but with Bucer he learned how to be a pastor and how to serve a church. Calvin saw great advances in his thinking during this time in the area of Christian education (because Bucer had begun a school there) and in the life and ministry work of the church. Bucer was eighteen years older than Calvin, so he was a kind of father figure to John Calvin during this time. We see, as we trace Calvin's life, a growing emphasis on the church, both in his own experience and involvement as a pastor and also in his writing. The reform in Geneva, which Calvin undertook, was really the work of his lifetime. His primary goal was to reform the church and to bring it into line with what he thought were the standards of the Bible. It is interesting that Calvin dedicated his Titus commentary to Farel and to Pierre Viret. Viret was another reformer who was serving not far away in Lausanne, and Calvin dedicated the commentary that he wrote on the book of Titus to Farel and Viret. He said that as Titus completed the work begun by Paul, so he was the successor to Farel and Viret, to complete the work that these two Reformers had begun in the region of Geneva.

When Calvin attempted his work of reform in Geneva, he was governed by two great ideas. Of course, the primary idea is the reform principle, which he finds in the Scripture. In other words, Calvin's reformation was not innovation. To him, reformation was restoration. He wanted to restore the church to its original integrity, and he will often refer to the regulative principle, not in those words. That is the expression that we use for it, but if you look at the commentary on Hebrews 8:5, you will see how Calvin expresses this. Hebrews 8:5 says, "For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.'" Calvin interprets and applies this by saying, "We are taught here that any mode of worship which is based on human inventions is false and contrary to God's command. Because God gives us instructions that everything is to be done according to His instruction, it is unlawful for us to do anything different." So as Calvin looked at the church in Geneva and attempted to bring it into line with the Scripture, he followed this idea. God has told us, in Hebrews 8:5, what ought to be done. That applies particularly to worship, but Calvin would also extend that to the order of the church, the polity of the church, and so on. So you might say that is the primary principle that Calvin uses.

A secondary principle that Calvin uses—and uses more than we would expect, I think—is tradition. He not only looks to see what the Scripture says, but he also looks to see what the church has done in its history. Now Calvin is quite critical of some of the traditions of the church, but generally not of the early church. He is critical of the medieval church, but he believed that the church remained basically healthy, both in its doctrine and in its practice, for the first 500 years. From time to time, Calvin would speak about the consensus of the first 500 years. Calvin was not of the mind to just erase everything that had transpired in 1500 years of Christian history and attempt to go back to some kind of New Testament pattern, as the Anabaptists and other radicals wanted to do. Rather, he wanted to use wisely and thoughtfully the early tradition of the church.

In some ways there may seem to be a tension between the regulative principle and Calvin's appreciation for tradition. I am not altogether sure how Calvin worked this out in his own mind, but we have examples of Calvin's appreciation for tradition in, for instance, the mode of baptism. We will come to

that later. Calvin was quite sure that the mode of baptism practiced in the New Testament was immersion. When he was dealing with the baptism of the Ethiopian by Philip, and they go down into the water, Calvin does not get nervous at that point like the Presbyterians do. (We generally point out that it was out in the desert, so it must not have been much water, and maybe they just got their feet wet or something like that.) Calvin says that the early practice was immersion, but the real significance of the mode is the application of water, and so it really does not matter how much water there is, as long as water is used. He is quite comfortable with the idea that the early practice was immersion, but the contemporary, traditional practice was by effusion. Calvin performed baptism by effusion without too much concern that it was not being done exactly the way it had been done in the New Testament. I suppose Calvin would reconcile the regulative principle with his acceptance of tradition there by saying the New Testament does not command immersion, at least in his understanding. It commands the use of water, and so to use less water than was used originally would not be a violation of that command.

We see the same thing happen in Calvin's development of his liturgy. He is appreciative of traditional forms of worship. Although Calvin's liturgy is not nearly so traditional as Luther's or as Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, he still preserves much of the early style of Christian worship. Perhaps the most striking place where tradition comes in (you can add this by mode of baptism and liturgy in the syllabus) is in church government. There we also see Calvin's acceptance of tradition, or at least his willingness to tolerate certain developments in the early stages of church government, although he did not advocate these ideas for the government of the church in Geneva.

In chapter 4 of Book IV, Calvin deals with the condition of the ancient church and the kind of government in use before the papacy. By "before the papacy," he means before about 500 AD. Of course, the Roman Catholic view is that the papacy started with the early church, but Calvin did not accept that. There is the early church, and then about 500 AD or so, it is possible to talk about the papal church. As Calvin investigates that early history, it moves from a simple (as we would think of it, and as Calvin did, too) biblical polity with elders who are also called bishops—the two are interchangeable—and deacons. From there the church saw the addition of bishops, archbishops, and patriarchs. You see all of these steps in the development of church polity early on in the history of the church. Rather than condemning all of that, Calvin says that this was connected with the maintenance of discipline. Calvin sees the hierarchy of the church developing, and he explains it as being connected with the maintenance of discipline. Then he talks about archdeacons. Calvin certainly did not have archdeacons in his polity, and neither are they found in the New Testament, but he says that this is "a new and more exact kind of administration." He sees a proper role for the archdeacons. Then he comes to doorkeepers, acolytes, and subdeacons. All of those offices also existed in the early church fairly early on, not right at the beginning, but within the first five centuries. Rather than railing against those developments, Calvin says that these were steps in preparation for ministry. So you can see that Calvin is concerned for basic scriptural principles, but he has a good bit of tolerance for different ideas that can develop in the history of the church. He does not embody all of that within his own polity, but I think that his relaxed attitude there toward tradition shows a certain breadth in Calvin that we do not always ascribe to him.

When we come to the chapters after chapter 4, chapters 5 through 11, when he is dealing with what he calls the papal church, we see that there he can be quite strong in his opinion, with a good bit of invective added for what he considers very improper changes and a real deterioration in the life of the church. We see Calvin's increasing emphasis on the church in the reform in Geneva and in his doctrine of the church in his writing on the church in the *Institutes* and elsewhere. We see the importance of the church for Calvin as Calvin laid increasing stress on the church in his practice, and so he gives a corresponding significance to the doctrine of the church in the *Institutes*. I think that here he goes far beyond Luther. Luther does not pay a lot of attention to the institution of the church. Luther is concerned

with the Gospel. Luther's attitude was "Preach the Gospel, and everything else will take care of itself." So as far as the church was concerned, Luther was willing to let the state structure the church to a large extent. Calvin, a generation later, gave much more attention to the doctrine of the church. Calvin, more than Luther, faced proliferating sectarianism—that is, many, many churches of different kinds, particularly on the fringe of the Reformation. He also faced a resurgent Catholicism that was being strengthened by the ongoing Council of Trent and the work of the Jesuits. So the issue of the church—"What is the true church? How do we describe the church? How do we understand the church?"—became much more central to Calvin's thinking.

There are two themes that I think we see as we look at Calvin's doctrine of the church, not only in the *Institutes*, but in other writings as well. Calvin wrote quite a few treatises that are collected, and we can read those. Some are on theological issues, but many deal with the church—its practice, its polity, and its authenticity. Two themes that we need to be aware of are the purity of the church and the unity of the church. We will look a little later at Calvin's view of the purity of the church. I recommend Dr. Parker's *Calvin and Ecclesiastical Separation*, which was an article in the *Presbyterian Journal* in 1985, for a good statement of Calvin's view of church purity and when it becomes necessary to separate from an impure church.

A few years ago, a group of us visited Princeton Seminary, and we were doing a tour. I was giving lectures at Princeton. We went to the university and to the seminary and to the cemetery. You have to go to all three at Princeton. At the seminary, we were being welcomed by one of the professors there who is a friend of mine. This professor said something about the fact that schism is a sin. Undoubtedly he had in mind the fact that we were PCA people, not PCUSA people. He said that schism is a sin, but it is not an unforgivable sin. I suppose he thought we would feel better about it if he added that we could be forgiven of the sin of schism, but it struck me as a rather strange statement for a Presbyterian to make, because Calvin certainly left the church in his day. We will come to that and see reasons for it.

We should also emphasize, however, Calvin's concern for the unity of the church. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:10, he says, "The most important principle of our religion is this: that we should be in concord among ourselves." In his letter to Cranmer of April 1552, this was when Edward VI had become the boy-king and Calvin was concerned to bring unity within the Protestant groups. He said, "So much does this concern me that, could I be of any service, I would not grudge to cross even 10 seas, if need be, on account of it." For a man who lived most of his life in landlocked Switzerland, to think about crossing 10 seas would be a daring feat, but Calvin said he would do that or anything else if he could bring unity to the church. Calvin yearned for unity. He even attended a few colloquies with Roman Catholics—without a great deal of hope, but at least he was there to see if there could be some sort of reconciliation of the different parts of the church. However, he was also fearful that unity might be established on the wrong basis, by covering over differences, rather than a real commitment to the Word of God.

One of Calvin's writings that you might note on this theme is his 1549 response to the Augsburg Interim, which was a law that had been passed in the empire. Charles V wanted to bring unity to the empire, and the Augsburg Interim basically stated Roman Catholic doctrines with some concessions to Protestants. Calvin could not accept that, because the Interim imposed Roman Catholic teaching on justification and other doctrines, and the concessions to Protestants were, in his mind, minor. His book in 1549 was called *On the True Peace and Unity of the Reformed Church*. In that book, we can see something of Calvin's concern to bring unity to the church.

All that is kind of background material having to do with Calvin and the church. What I want to do next, before the next main point in the syllabus, which is an investigation of the title of Book IV, is talk a little bit about the relation between Book IV and the first three books, just to see where we are in the overall development of Calvin's thought. You remember that Calvin is following the Apostles' Creed, among other structures. This is one structural form that he has in mind. "I believe in God the Father." He treats that in Book I. "I believe in Jesus Christ." He treats Christ in Book II. "I believe in the Holy Spirit." He treats the Holy Spirit in Book III. As we say that, I think I should just mention what I mentioned before, which is that Calvin is very trinitarian in his thought, so that Book I is about the Trinity, Book II is about the Trinity, and Book III is about the Trinity. Within the Trinity, though, there is special emphasis on the Father in Book I, Christ in Book II, and the Holy Spirit in Book III. The Apostles' Creed continues, "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." We can see the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins in Book IV, but I think we have to say that he also treats communion of saints and forgiveness of sins in Book III. So these themes in the Apostles' Creed are treated in both Book III and Book IV of the *Institutes*. Then the final two statements, resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, Calvin has already treated in the end of Book III, in chapter 25.

You know from our reading today that Calvin makes a point of something that maybe you have not thought about. He says there is no good reason to assert the word "in" in the phrase, "I believe in the church." That is Book IV, chapter 1, section 2. The creed says, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and *in* Jesus Christ, His only Son," and so on. "I believe *in* the Holy Ghost," and then there is a comma or a semicolon, and then you have a list: "the holy catholic church, communion of saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Calvin says we should leave the "in" out, or at least not repeat it in our thinking. We believe *in* God the Father; we believe *in* Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, and we believe *in* the Holy Ghost, but we do not believe *in* the holy catholic church. Calvin wanted to make this distinction. "We believe in God because our mind reposes in Him as truthful and our trust rests in Him." So we believe *in* God, but we believe certain other truths. We do not believe *in* them. We believe in God, and then we believe that there is a holy catholic church. We believe that there is such a thing as communion of saints. We believe that God forgives sins. We believe that the body will be raised. We believe that there is eternal life. Do you see the difference between believing the truthfulness of those statements and resting your faith in a person? To make a distinction, Calvin says that we believe in God, but we do not believe in the church. We do not rest our faith in the church. We rest our faith in God alone.

Here is another way to connect the material that has gone before with Book IV. This is how I would do it. Book IV, it seems to me, is not a continuation of Books I through III as such. One way you might see it is that you have Books I, II, and III, and then you also have Book IV. I think that would be a normal way to see it. However, I think that it is a mistake to see Book IV as a continuation of the first three books. After all, we have ended Book III with the final resurrection, so in one sense Calvin has finished. He has gotten us to heaven, and that is the end. So rather than seeing Book IV as the next step, you might say, I would think it would be better to see Book IV as gathering up the themes that Calvin has already discussed and placing those in the concrete, earthly experience of the believer. You might say that Books I, II, and III equal Book IV. What we have studied so far in Calvin leads into Book IV, in which all that we have learned about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be worked out in our day-by-day earthly existence in the church and as citizens of the state. Another way to diagram it, perhaps, would be this: the first three books point to Book IV, and Book IV points back to the first three books. There are different ways that you can look at the relationship between these books, but I think something like this last way is helpful. Here is another way that someone has done it. Book I (and really the first part of Book II) talks about fallen creatures. Book II and Book IV give us Christ's redemption

and the church's ministry of the Gospel, which then leads to Book III, which is our salvation. Book III is the inward application, and Book IV the outward helps, or aids. If you look at it this way, Book I and the first part of Book II show our need, and then the rest of Book II shows the provision that God makes for our need in Christ and in the church, because it is the church that will minister Christ to us. We hear the Gospel through the church. We are taught by the church, and that leads us, then, to salvation in Christ.

Now let us take a closer look at the title and exegete that for a few minutes: "The external means, or aids, by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein." "The society of Christ" seems to be an unusual expression. I think what Calvin means by that is fellowship with Christ. Calvin uses the expression "union with Christ" more than "fellowship with Christ." This book is about the way in which God invites us. Notice those words, "invites us." God is giving an invitation. He is inviting us to join with His Son. "The society of Christ," as we move through Book IV, will more and more take on also the meaning of the church, but in the title I think it means union with Christ, or fellowship with Christ, because the church is one of the means, or aids, by which this is accomplished. So God invites us into the society of Christ, but how does God do that? Calvin says that God uses external means. If you go back to Book III, you would say there is the primary agent, the Holy Spirit, which is an internal means—the Holy Spirit, faith, repentance, and so on—but Book IV talks about external means. So not only is there the internal work of the Spirit to invite us into the society of Christ, or to unite us to Christ, but there are these external means by which the Spirit works, as Calvin says in Book IV, chapter 1, section 1, "to beget and increase faith in us." That is really the whole theme of Book III: the Spirit working to beget and increase faith in us. We see in Book IV that there are external means by which the Spirit works. Those external means include a visible earthly institution called the church. There are also human words spoken by human lips, which we call preaching a sermon. There is water for baptism and bread and wine, which we eat in the Lord's Supper. These external means are used by the Holy Spirit to invite us into fellowship with Christ, or union with Christ, and to keep us therein.

When Calvin explains this, as he does in Book IV, chapter 1, section 1, he asks the question, "Why do we need this? Why does God do this? Why can we not just end with the final resurrection? Why do we need these external things?" Why do we need them? What is Calvin's answer there? Why do we need the church and baptism and the Lord's Supper and preaching? Why does God use these things? Why does He choose to work through external means? Does He have to do it that way? He does not, but Calvin says that we need these things because of our weakness. It is God's graciousness to us. "We are shut up in the prison-house of our flesh," Calvin says in Book IV, chapter 1, section 1. "We have not yet attained angelic rank." If we were angels, we would not need these external means, but we are not, "so God in His wonderful providence accommodates Himself"—there is that use of "accommodation" that we notice so often in the *Institutes*—"to our capacity by giving us outward helps so that we, though still far off, can draw near to Him." We need to hear the sermons. We need to hear the Word preached by preachers. We need the church and all that the church does. We need to know that water has been placed on us in baptism. We need to eat the bread and drink the wine. It is all for us, because we are bodily creatures. We are not of angelic rank. We are not spirits only, so these external means are important and useful. These are means "by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein." Calvin means to say that these are God's means. The church and the sacraments are means of grace. They are not devices that belong to us that we can somehow use to manipulate God, as was more of the medieval idea of the sacramental system: "If you do it correctly, you get grace." Calvin says these are God's means by which He gives grace to us, outward helps to beget and increase faith within us. And they are means by which God invites us into fellowship with Christ and holds us therein. Alternatively, we could say, as we go further in Book IV, that God invites us into the church and holds us therein. So there is not only regeneration here, but perseverance as well. God uses these means to bring us to faith and to keep us in faith. "God does not raise us to perfection in a moment," Calvin says. We know that

from our earlier study in Book III of his doctrine of repentance. It is a lifelong grace. God does not raise us to perfection in a moment, but makes us grow little by little under the nurture of the church. That is Book I, chapters 4 and 5.

The place of the sanctification for the Christian is not the individual Christian. It is not the isolated Christian. That is not the context of sanctification. It is the church, “the congregation of believers in which all the blessings which God bestows upon them are mutually communicated to each other” (Book IV, chapter 1, section 3). Calvin adds this, too, in Book IV, chapter 1, section 5, “Although God’s power is not bound to outward means, He has nonetheless bound us to this ordinary manner of teaching.” In other words, God could do without the church. God could work without the church if He so chose to do in that way, but we cannot. We are bound to the outward means. God is not bound to the outward means. It is His choice to give us the church and to give us baptism and to give us the Lord’s Supper, but it is not our choice as to whether we accept those or not. The Christian cannot opt out of the visible church and the outward means. There is no such thing, in Calvin, as a kind of private Christianity. The corrective of the Reformers to the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church was not individual Christianity. They were not saying that the structure was evil and that people should come out of it and relate directly to God without the abuses and evil that we find in the visible church. The corrective of the Reformers was a purified church. None of them ever really moved away from a high view of the church that was just as high as the Roman Catholic view, but they did urge a purified church and then also personal appropriation of the teachings of the church, not just mechanically going through the motions.

We have 15 minutes left for this lesson. I could have gone back to that unfinished business on election, but I have the wrong notebook for that. I will still do that at some point, but let us go ahead and begin with the nature of the church.

What is the true church? How can one be right with God? Those are two important questions. How can one find a gracious God, and what is the church? Those were the two burning issues, I would say, in the sixteenth century (and really in any century, but particularly of the sixteenth century). Is it possible for a person to say, “I am no longer a Roman Catholic,” and still be a Christian? When I reject Mass and leave the Catholic Church, am I a member of the church anymore? All kinds of answers were given to questions like that, and here is Calvin’s way of dealing with that. Calvin stresses—as did Augustine, but contrary to most Roman Catholic teaching in the medieval period—that there are two churches, two true churches: a visible church and an invisible church. Now, we should not think of these as two entirely separate entities without any relation to each other, but they are not identical, either. When we talk about the church, we have to talk about the church in two ways: visible and invisible. The invisible church is the church as God sees it. Book IV, chapter 1, section 7 defines the invisible church as “all the elect from the beginning of the world.” We cannot see that church because we cannot see what is before us or what is coming after us, nor can we truly see all the elect now. That is the church as God sees it. For us that church is an object of faith. It is not an object of experience. We believe that there is an invisible church, a pure church, a perfect church, in which God’s elect through all ages are gathered. But the church that we know, the church that we see, is the visible church. For us, that is an object of experience. Calvin’s definition of visible church, in Book IV, chapter 1, section 7, is “the whole multitude of men”—that means people—“spread out over the earth who profess to worship one God in Christ.” So the visible church is the professing church everywhere. We cannot identify the visible church with the elect. We cannot say that the visible church is the invisible church. We are not able to do that. Calvin quotes Augustine, “Many sheep are without, and many wolves are within.” Augustine said that there are sheep outside of the visible church, and there are wolves within the visible church. It is a little puzzling to know exactly what Augustine or Calvin meant by that. There are sheep outside. Did they mean that there are elect people who are not yet justified? That might have been Calvin’s meaning.

We know that there are certainly elect people in the world who are not yet saved, because they have not yet come to repentance and faith in Christ. They will, because they are elect, so they are not in the visible church, at least not yet. Alternatively, did Calvin mean something else? He might have meant people who were cut off from the visible church for some reason, by no choice of their own. An example of this would be a person in Roman Catholic territory where there is no Protestant church. Calvin was very much set against Protestant converts continuing to be members of Catholic churches and participating in Mass. Another example might be Christians in areas controlled by the Turks in Eastern Europe, where there would not be the opportunity to worship God in a church. In either case, Calvin believed that there could be Christians outside of the church, either elect people not yet brought to faith or people who had come to faith but for one reason or another, because of circumstances and not of their own choosing, found themselves outside of the visible church.

Whatever Calvin and Augustine meant, they certainly made it clear that they do not identify the visible church as the whole number of the elect. There are elect, "sheep," outside. They make it clear, too, that not everyone in the visible church is elect. There are wolves within. It is easier to understand that one, because that means that there are people who are visibly connected with the church who are not truly regenerate and could be described, not as sheep, but as wolves. So Calvin says that to know who are His is a prerogative belonging solely to God. We leave that with Him, so we cannot identify the visible church with the elect, but we must judge the members of the Christian church with charity. Here is the point that I think is important, because Calvin is not always viewed as charitable. In fact, however, he certainly is charitable in many places and certainly at this point. He says in Book IV, chapter 1, section 8, "We recognize as members of the church those who by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God in Christ with us." We see people who are members of the visible church. These people hold to the Gospel, live good lives, partake of the sacraments, and profess to believe in God and in Christ. Calvin says that as far as we are concerned, we can call those people Christians. We do not have to know whether they are elect or not. We cannot know that, and we should not judge them harshly. We should accept their profession, unless in some way they deny their profession by the way they live.

We could call the invisible and visible two aspects of the church. They are not two churches, but two aspects of the church: the church as God sees it, and the church as we experience it. I think it might be helpful to look at it this way. We can draw a circle for the invisible church and then a circle for the visible church. These are two aspects of the church. They overlap to a certain degree. There is an overlapping of these two circles. Part of the visible membership falls outside of the sphere of election; part of the visible church cannot be identified with the invisible church. There is chaff as well as wheat. In addition, some of the elect, some of the invisible church, fall outside the sphere of the visible community, for reasons that I discussed a few minutes ago. One place where Calvin makes this clear is that, unlike the Roman Catholics, and unlike the Lutherans, Calvin did not insist that baptism was necessary for salvation. If baptism is necessary for salvation, then there is no way that an unbaptized person could be saved. It would be necessary to be a member of the visible church for salvation. One place where we see this is in Calvin's commentary on John 3:5, which says, "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth. Unless a man is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.'" Calvin deals with that text at some length and actually comes to the view that it does not have anything to do with water baptism at all. He says this: "But even were we to grant that Christ is speaking of baptism here, we ought not to press His words so as to make Him confine salvation to the outward sign. On the contrary, He connects water with the spirit, because under the visible sign He testifies and seals the newness of life which, by His Spirit, God alone effects in us." We are born of the water and the spirit. The water, for Calvin, is the cleansing that the Holy Spirit brings in regeneration. Calvin goes on to say, "It is true, indeed, that we are excluded from salvation if we neglect baptism. In this sense, I confess it is

necessary, but it is absurd to confine assurance of salvation to the sign.” In other words, the outward means is there, and we cannot reject it if we have opportunity to embrace it, but the salvation does not reside in the outward means. It resides in the inward cleansing of the Holy Spirit, which has already been accomplished. By not requiring baptism for salvation, Calvin is able to consider as members of the true church, the invisible church, people who have been regenerated but for one reason or another have not been baptized—although not of their own choice, since it would be wrong if it was of their own choice.

Some have suggested that the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church is somewhat clumsy and uncomfortable, but it was certainly not to Calvin. He is very clear that this is a useful way of looking at the church. Likewise, the Westminster Divines also found this to be a useful way of looking at the church. I rather like it, myself. I think it is helpful, because you have the concept of the invisible church, which is always there to guard against our identifying the earthly institution as all the church should be. I think we need the distinction. The danger, I think, is that it can be used—and perhaps has been used by some—to deemphasize the importance of the visible church. People might say, “I am a member of the invisible church, so I do not have to go to church on Sunday, because that is the visible church, and that is not so important.” If it is used to deemphasize the importance of the visible church, then it is very bad. If we use the idea of the invisible church to speak of a pure church without spot and without blemish, which is the church as it will be in heaven, then I think we can use it to judge the failures of the visible church. I would say that we should keep the distinction. I think it is useful.

So that is one way that Calvin looks at the church, visible and invisible, but there is another way that he looks at the visible church, and that is true and false. That is what we will come to next time.