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The Church as our mother: New perspectives on apostolic succession

ABSTRACT

Calvin uses the metaphor of a mother when speaking of the church. This article discusses its meaning, Calvin's relation with Cyprian (who first introduced the metaphor), and its relevance for contemporary ecclesiology. The concept turns out to be very much related to office as one of the guarantees for the true church. It also prevents us from separating ourselves from the church and disdaining it, even if it is fallible.

CALVIN ON THE CHURCH AS MOTHER

"But as it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church, let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government ..."² This quotation is not from a high church Roman Catholic, but from John Calvin. He begins his reflections on the Church in the fourth edition of his *Institutes* with the statement that she is our Mother. That sets the tone from the very beginning. We must love the Church. We must respect her. We can only speak about her with deep reverence. He is not speaking about the true invisible Church as God's elected community. He is speaking about the visible church: the church with its ministers and members.

Now, Calvin's focus at first is not so much on the organisation of the Church. As is usual for the Reformers, his attention is first of all directed to the proclamation of the Word. It is by the Word that we become Christians, and not by the church's organisation as such. Regarded from the perspective of church law, this is the first law: that the Word be proclaimed. Therefore we must not interpret Calvin's idea of the Church as our Mother ontologically. We must not stretch the metaphor that far. That is clear from the title of this fourth book of the *Institutes*: "Of the external means or helps by which God invites us into fellowship with Christ, and keeps us in it." True Christian communion is not communion with the Church, but communion with Christ. The Church is merely a means of establishing and maintaining that communion. Thus the metaphor indicates where our faith began: in the Church. But the Church is not an aim in itself. She only serves the relation with Christ. Therefore the Apostolic Creed does not confess "I believe in the Church", but "I believe the Church". The Church is not our ultimate trust. We do not worship her. She is just an instrument for communion with Christ, so that we are children of God. We are not children of God because we are members of the Church as our mother, but because we are inserted into Christ.

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2 Calvin, *Institutes* 1559, IV,1.4. Citations here are from the translation of Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

In order to understand what this means for Calvin, we must turn to the very beginning of his *Institutes*. He starts with a reflection on the knowledge of God. He deals extensively with the Word in the first part of Book I. We know God by his Word. The focus is not on the Church in that part. Calvin even explicitly rejects the Roman Catholic interpretation of Augustine's famous saying, "I would not believe the gospel if the Church did not move me to do so"³. It is about the Word itself. It is the Word as it works by the Holy Spirit. The core of these reflections is the section on the *autopistia* of the Scripture⁴. *Autopistia* means that the Scripture makes itself trustworthy by itself. That does not mean that Scripture is true because the Bible states that Scripture is true. That would be a circular argument. What Calvin means is that the Scripture makes such an impression on us, that we cannot but believe it. When we hear its words we become convinced internally. We can compare this with an encounter with a person. Whether we consider someone to be really trustworthy may depend on a friend who tells us that the person we will meet is trustworthy. Because we trust our friend, we will trust that person as well. But it will be a surer foundation if we do not trust the new acquaintance because of our friend's recommendation, but because we find this other person convincing in him- or herself. That is the way the Scripture is convincing for us, says Calvin: "Such, then, is a conviction which asks not for reasons; such, a knowledge which accords with the highest reason; namely, knowledge in which the mind rests more firmly and securely than in any reasons; such, in fine, the conviction which revelation from heaven alone can produce"⁵. That is the way we enter into a relation with God: because his Word convinces us of the truth, by which we know Him and know ourselves⁶. It is God Himself as the Holy Spirit who comes to us in the Word and takes us into his communion.

We must understand Calvin's thought on the Church in Book IV in that perspective. After the core of faith has been explained to the reader, finally Calvin tells us by what means God bestows this faith on us. It is in the Church. We must interpret the hearing of the Word in the perspective of *autopistia*. We go to the church, where the Word is preached. We are touched by it and convinced by it. There it happened, and still happens. We would not have known about the Word, not have known about God, not have felt His love and grace, if there would not have been a place where we heard it. There our faith was born. There we were born again. In the perspective of the *autopistia* of the Scripture, Calvin closes off two other ways. The first is that we could be born again by some working of the Spirit without the Word. Spirit and Word always go hand in hand. The Spirit works through the Word. The second is that church leaders could manipulate us. No human being can give us faith, and no human being can destroy our faith. It is created by hearing the Word that is self-evident and convinces us. The Church is just the place where we hear it.

The Church as our Mother means that we received our faith by hearing the Word, being touched by a hymn, getting involved in a prayer. It means getting involved in something that the Christian community which we call the Church provides us with. That is the first meaning of the Church as Mother: where do we come from as Christians?

Calvin however, enlarges the metaphor. A mother not only gives birth to a child, she also nurtures it. So does the Church. Indeed, we need the Church throughout our whole life. As long as we are on earth we are only little children. For the children of God, adulthood is only attained in eternal life. Thus we are dependent on our mother. "For our weakness does not permit us to leave

3 Augustine, *Contra ep. Fund.* 5; Calvin, *Institutes* I,7,3.

4 *Institutes* I,7,4/5.

5 *Institutes* I,7,5.

6 See *Institutes* I,1.

the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars”⁷. Thus the second meaning of the Church as Mother is that we must go to the Church in order to survive as children of God.

Now, the Church is not a mechanical instrument. The preaching of the Word, singing, praying and blessing is done by human beings. The way these human beings do this is very important. The metaphor of the mother evokes feelings of care and love. It is about an attitude. The metaphor is not emotionally neutral. Thus by using this metaphor Calvin excludes a mere mechanical proclamation of the Word. Are those who preach the Word caring and loving persons⁸? Calvinism is often considered to be rigid and harsh. Not so. He is very much moved by care and tenderness for the members of the congregation. That is the reason he fulminates against priests who abuse their position and power, making people dependent on themselves and exploiting them for their own ends. The philippics against them are the most furious sections in the *Institutes*.

A Christians’ faith is born as true faith in Christ, and not as anxious fear of men, in a loving and caring community which is led by people who express this attitude. There is no difference between a mother who reads to her children from the Bible or tells a story to her child sitting on her lap, and a pastor who leads the congregation by the Word of God. There should be no difference between a praying mother and a praying elder in the Church.

Thus the metaphor poses a demand on the Church and its leaders. Is the Church a caring and loving community? Do its leaders express that attitude? That is the way Christians are born as children of God and kept in the community of Christ. It is a demand, but a demand that is easy to fulfil, for the Church and its leaders are people who are touched by the love of Christ, and by the caring presence of his Spirit. Persons who themselves are touched by love express love to others. That is the way the Church grows and flowers.

CALVIN AND CYPRIAN

Calvin was not the first to use the metaphor of the Church as Mother. He borrowed it from the Church Father Cyprian. Cyprian penned the famous line, “Nobody can have God as father who does not have the Church as mother”⁹. Unlike Calvin, Cyprian’s stress is not on the Word that is preached in the Church, but on ministry. Only in the unity with the bishop is Christian life possible. If you claim to be a Christian and you are not in communion with the regularly ordained bishop, you are deceiving yourself and other people. Thus there is a difference between Calvin and Cyprian. Calvin focuses on the dynamics of the preaching of the Word by which people are convinced and get involved in the communion with Christ. Cyprian focuses on formal organisation and ordained ministry. Of course ministry is not excluded by Calvin, but it is the ministry of the Word. A pastor is *verbi divini minister*. For Cyprian ministry is ordained ministry dependent on a bishop. For Calvin you cannot live without a story telling and nurturing mother. For Cyprian you cannot live without staying in your mother’s house and keeping the house rules.

It seems a real difference. At least one gets the impression that Calvin is more dynamic and warmer. Many present-day Christians will prefer Calvin’s position, as soon as they have overcome the idea that Calvin is rigid. They prefer a warm and dynamic community to a formal, strict organisation with bishops and ordained ministry, such as Cyprian argues for. I will argue however that the difference is only apparent.

7 *Institutes* IV,1,4.

8 Cf. *Institutes* I,4,3.

9 Cyprian, *De Unit. Eccl.* 6.

To make this clear we must first turn to the background against which Cyprian wrote. He lived in the middle of the third century during great tribulations of the Church, both persecutions and internal conflicts. For more than a hundred years this had been the case, with only short periods of relief. The Church, which had spread throughout the whole Roman Empire, consisted of many communities. There was great diversity among them. All of them told about the love and mercy of God in Christ. The deepest expression of this seemed to be in Marcionite and Gnostic communities. They talked about a God of sheer love. They told about eternal spiritual life, which was not touched by earthly interests and materialism. Many people were moved by this message. They were comforted and nurtured by the good message of the gospel. They really could feel the Church as a loving Mother. According to some modern scholars these communities were more loving than those that finally issued into the orthodox Church. They were less hierarchic and not patriarchal like the latter¹⁰.

Nevertheless they were condemned as heretical. That was not because of their attitude, but because they did not hold to the teaching of the apostles, as the orthodox argued. They did not preach the whole Word of God. They neglected the testimony of the Scriptures that God is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. Marcionites cleaned up the canon, leaving out the whole Old Testament, and a good part of the New Testament. Gnostics could keep these by strongly allegorising and spiritualising the texts¹¹. Both told stories about God. Both inspired people to become Christians and to stay in the Christian community. Both gave birth to Christians and both nurtured them for their whole lives. Everything Calvin expresses by his metaphor of the Church as Mother seems to be present. Nevertheless they were wrong, not only according to the Church Fathers of the second and third century, but to Calvin as well.

Thus it is not sufficient that there is a caring and story-telling community. There must also be truth. Are the right stories told on the right way? If not, people are deceived. Then things may seem to be caring and loving, but actually what happens is very bad. The issue is eternal salvation, and the right worship of God. That is what is at stake.

If a community, however warm and tender it may be, is putting you on the wrong track, then this community is not your mother, but like a prostitute. She does not give birth to children of God in Jesus Christ, but to children of the devil. That is the way both Church Fathers and Reformers deal with heretics.

THE TRUE MOTHER

How is it possible to keep the Church on track as a real mother? The early Church developed three instruments, which are complementary: the canon, the creeds, and offices. Like the three legs of a

10 Cf. E.P. Meijering, *Irenaeus: Grondlegger van het christelijk denken*, Balans, Amsterdam 2001, 16-18, who however himself takes a different position (18-20). Not all scholars who reject the patriarchal system of orthodoxy prefer Gnosticism or Marcionitism. See for example E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Crossroad, New York 1984: 274-283, who argues that, just like the orthodox Fathers, Gnostic and to an even greater degree Marcionite communities considered the male as higher than the female. For the ambiguity of Jesus' relations to people in early extra-canonical literature see also K. Berger, *Wer war Jesus Wirklich?*, Quell Verlag, Stuttgart 1995, ch. IV.

11 See E.P. Meijering, *Als de uitleg maar goed is: Hoe vroege christenen de bijbel gebruikten*, Meinema, Zoetermeer 2003: 45-47. Also among the Gnostics themselves there were different opinions on the Old Testament (see P.L. Wansink, *Irenaeus en het Oude Testament: Gnostische en heilshistorische exegete in de tweede eeuw*, Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer 2000, 153-170).

stool, none of those can be dispensed with. The first instrument for holding on to the truth is the canon. The main line of the canon was already shaped in an early stage of the Church. Only marginal differences are discussed from the very beginning. But the canon was open to different interpretations, as the Gnostic movement proved. The canon can also be used selectively. Christians of the twentieth century usually accept the whole canon. But actually they use it in a Marcionite way. They only use texts that speak about God's love, and they neglect those chapters that deal with God's wrath, and with his almighty power, even if people suffer. Actually Marcionism is very strong nowadays.

Thus the canon is not enough. It was even more inadequate on its own because other communities of the second and third century which called themselves Christians had different canons, not only the Marcionites, but also Gnostic groups. Probably the Gospel of Thomas and other writings were more canonical in these circles than the books of the New Testament.

We need a criterion for the right canon and for its right interpretation. This criterion is given by the second instrument: the creeds. Over against Gnostics and Marcionites the Church confessed that we believe in the Almighty Creator. A canon that is shaped in order to deny this confession is wrong.

But by what authority does a part of the movement that originated from Jesus claim that truth? Who legitimated them to claim their canon and their interpretation as the only right one? Here the third instrument emerges: offices. The offices are the guarantee of correct interpretation. And here we come to Cyprian: without the bishop you cannot receive true life. You cannot have the Church as mother, if it is not the bishop's Church. Thus you cannot have God as Father, without this mother, and that means without the bishop.

If we interpret this as timeless, we do not do justice to Cyprian. What he says is not about the bishop as such. It is not about a bishop's formal authority only. It has to do with the tradition he comes from and upholds. Even the strongest Roman Catholic interpretations of the bishop's ministry speak about apostolic *succession*. So we are dealing with a line running through time.

How should we understand this? It is first of all *apostolic*, just like the Creed is apostolic. The latter does not mean that the creed was written by the apostles, but that it is according to the message of the apostles. That is also precisely what apostolic succession is about: that the message of the apostles is preserved.

It turned out that the Christian message from the very beginning was understood and shaped in different ways. Even in the books of the New Testament there are a variety of expressions of the faith. Nevertheless they are a unity. Precisely those scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza¹² who oppose a strict limitation to the traditional canon have demonstrated that the New Testament is a specific tradition in the whole of the Jesus movement. There is an apostolic tradition, a way Paul, Peter and John preached and understood the message of Christ as the Word of God. The new generation after them received that message and dealt with it in their own way. They shaped and reshaped it in a great variety. Already in the apostles' time different opinions arose. Not all of them were accepted by the apostles, as we can see both in the letters and the gospels of the New Testament. Often they oppose ideas which claim to be Christian, and refute them with authentic Christianity.

The ordained ministry emerges in that situation: the apostles consign their message and the leadership over the Church to people they trust. The book of Acts gives several examples of this. Paul orders the appointment of elders. The letters to Timothy and Titus refer to this practice.

12 See e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 68-76.

“Appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.” (Titus 1:5). Actually it can be compared with a great scholar who has made many discoveries in his field of research. One day he has to hand his work over to his staff. Then he entrusts it to those people in whom he has confidence. He will seek to avoid that people who are incompetent will destroy his work. He will try even harder to avoid having people who could abuse his work taking over leadership. Thus Paul entrusts his work to other people, like Timothy, Titus, Tychicus. He calls on them to do the same for new situations. “What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim 2:2). Every generation has leaders who have received this responsibility, and every generation has to hand it over to new persons who will be responsible for preserving the truth of the message.

Thus we come to the apostolic succession, and thus we also come to Cyprian’s idea that you cannot be saved without the bishop. We must keep to the authentic, trustworthy tradition as it has been handed down from generation to generation, and has been entrusted to persons who were adjudged trustworthy by their predecessors. Wise men appointed wise men, and in communion with their wisdom we are safe. The Church must always be aware of what Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Did the Word of God originate with you?” (I Cor 14:36) For “what do you have that you did not receive?” (I Cor 4:7). There was a generation of believers before us. That implies the metaphor of the Church as our Mother.

THE OFFICE OF BISHOP

Recently the Belgian Reformed theologian Eddy Van der Borght has argued for a supralocal personal ordained ministry¹³. We need, he says, a person who is responsible for correct church life. We need somebody who preserves the unity of the Church and prevents the Church from being scattered into a multitude of opinions and local interests¹⁴. We need somebody with the authority to keep us in the whole tradition of the one Body of Christ.

I think Van der Borght is right. It is not enough to have a fine Christian community where we feel at home. Such communities too can deceive us. It is not enough to have our Bible. Not that the Bible is insufficient, but people are inclined to abuse it, for all heretics have their Bible verses. It is not enough to have the whole Bible, for people use it selectively. It is not even enough to have creeds and confessions that tell us that those who do not keep this faith whole and intact will certainly be lost forever¹⁵, for confessions too are differently interpreted and often abused by people for their own ends. And time and again we encounter situations for which the confessions are not prepared. Therefore we need people who are entrusted to walk in the way of the faith as it has been handed down by the apostles, and to keep the Church on that path. This has to do not only with written texts, but with a whole spiritual life. They are people whom the leaders of the previous generation understood to be filled with the same Spirit and the same wisdom as they themselves had learned from those who formerly taught them Christ. That is more than can be written in a

13 E.A.J.G Van der Borght, *Het ambt herdacht: De gereformeerde ambtstheologie in het licht van het rapport Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Lima, 1982) van de theologische commissie Faith and Order van de Wereldraad van Kerken*, IIMO-research publication 55, Meinema, Zoetermeer 2000. Another recent plea for the office of bishop in the Protestant churches is J. Kronenburg: *Episcopus Oecumenicus: Bouwstenen voor een theologie van het bisschopsambt in een verenigde reformatorische kerk*, IIMO research publication 62, Meinema, Zoetermeer 2003.

14 Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* IV,1,5.

15 Athanasian Creed 2 and 40.

confession. That is more than the letter of the printed Bible. It has to do with the comprehensive faith the apostles handed down.

That should not be misunderstood quantitatively. That is a popular Roman Catholic understanding of tradition: we have the information of the Bible, and next to that we have the information of tradition, rooted in the oral tradition of the apostles. Then we come to an additional concept of Scripture and tradition. That was not the idea of the apostolic tradition and succession as it was used in the early Church. There it has to do with letter and Spirit. The letter alone is dead, and can be used for any ends people want to use it. We must understand it as the Spirit of Christ makes it alive. This Spirit does not dwell somewhere in a hidden place on earth, but is given to the Church. He dwells in human beings, who are touched by the word of the Gospel. Those people who express communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit are proven to be the real understanders of the Word. The apostles recognise their faith (2 Tim 1:5) as they recognise the same Spirit who is given to them.

Who appoints the leaders of the next generation? First of all, the leaders of the previous generation. Those who were trustworthy, appoint trustworthy successors (Tit 1:5; 2 Tim 2:2). They are able to assess the qualities of the new generation. In the New Testament we see that Paul himself appoints his successors (2 Tim 1). The next generations have differentiated this practice somewhat, for human beings are not perfect. They are not perfect even if they are wise and authentic bishops. Sometimes they failed to appoint good successors. Sometimes the successors turned out not to be what they seemed to be. Therefore the practice soon became that fellow bishops appointed a colleague to a vacant seat¹⁶. Thus one avoided succession of heresy, which easily could occur if only one bishop would appoint his successor. More bishops must be involved.

In a very early stage the people in the Church were also involved in the election of a bishop. That does not mean that they elected their own leader. The final decision was restricted to the bishops. But the bishops did not appoint someone who was not accepted by his people. All this has to do with safeguarding the true message of Jesus Christ. You must entrust that to persons who are able to judge, following in the footsteps of the apostles. Only they are able to make the right decisions. You entrust that to persons who have proven able to do so and thus can keep the people in the truth. But it does not help to appoint such a person if the congregation does not accept him. In that case the new bishop can tell the deepest truths, but the people will not listen to him. They will listen to anybody they like. Then the effect of the bishop's election will be confusion, heresy and schism, instead of preserving the unity of the Church in the unity of faith.

The cooperation of the people in the election has nothing to do with democracy. It has to do with preserving unity and truth in the Church. The real decision remained in the hands of the bishops.

All this seems very different from Reformed ecclesiology. In the Reformed churches the members of the congregation usually elect their ministers. There is no apostolic succession and ministry is preferably deduced from the office of all Christians. In addition, we do not have bishops. The core of Reformed thought on office is not the pastor, but the elder. There is a famous saying by Noordmans with a metaphor from chess: "When Calvin took the pawn of the elder, he checkmated the pope's king"¹⁷. Reformed churches are dominated by elders and not by pastors, let alone by bishops or a pope. Thus we are in quite a different field from Cyprian's ecclesiology.

16 See Cyprianus, *De unitate ecclesiae* 10; *Epist.* 68,2. See A. van de Beek, "The Dis-Unity of the Reformed Church" in L. Visser (ed.), *The Church in Reformed Perspective: A European Reflection*, John Knox Series 13, John Knox Center, Geneva 2002: 113f, 131.

17 O. Noordmans, *Verzamelde werken* 5, Kok, Kampen 1984: 396 and *Verzamelde werken* 8, Kok, Kampen 1980: 434. Actually Noordmans's argument is far more complicated than the way his famous saying is frequently used in church meetings and discussions. See esp. *Verzamelde Werken* 5: 397-399.

There are however reasons to be somewhat careful about this conclusion. If we look around the Reformed churches, we can note that the Hungarian Reformed churches have the office of bishop. These bishops are very influential and real church leaders. They often have more prerogatives and power than many Roman Catholic bishops. They are not elected by their diocese's people, but by the deans of the regional churches. Further, in the French churches elders are not a dominant presence in the service. There is no elder who escorts the minister to the pulpit. There the church is a pastors' church.

But even in the Dutch Reformed Church, which appears so democratic and is proud of the principle that the offices are equal, so that the elder is actually the primary representative of the congregation, we must conclude that the position of the pastor actually is far stronger than theory and ideology would suggest. That is reflected in the feelings of people in the church. If a member of the congregation, or even an elder visits a mourning widow ten times, she might still say "I have never seen anybody from the church!" because the pastor did not visit her. Even in the Church law there are many rules that allot a particular position to the pastor. The manner of election is different. They are ordained to their office by laying on of hands. Not so the elders and deacons. We could add many other examples to this¹⁸. Thus our conclusion must be that real church life in the Reformed churches is not as it is claimed to be by those who prefer a low church type¹⁹.

Now, we can conceive this as deviating from the original Reformation. That is however not at all the case. It is well known that Calvin accepted the bishops in Hungary and Poland. We could still consider that this was only a pragmatic adaptation to the difficult situation in which those churches found themselves. Accurate investigation to Calvin's writings however reveals a different picture. Van der Borgh has shown that for Calvin, ministry is actually the core of his theology of offices. He very rarely speaks about the elders. Some translations seem to show something else. But that is primarily due to incorrect translation, in which "presbyter" and "senior" are both translated as "elder", while actually the "senior" is the elder and the presbyter is the pastor, just as in the early Church. The role of the elders is very limited, mainly restricted to affairs of discipline²⁰. The Church is submitted to the Word, and in order to keep the Word central persons are appointed as ministers for preaching the Word.

Now we return to the section in the *Institutes* where Calvin speaks about the Church as our Mother. In section 4 he speaks about the people of God. That is the first point where he speaks about the visible Church. He ends this section by saying, "Abandonment of the Church is always fatal." In section 5 he continues immediately with the offices: "Let us proceed to a full exposition of this view. Paul says that our Saviour 'ascended far above all heavens, that he might fill all things. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers...'" The chapter is fully directed to the preaching of the Word. But this is entrusted to the pastors: "The preaching of celestial doctrine is committed to pastors."²¹ Thus the core of being the Church is being connected to the ministers. That does not sound so very much different from Cyprian. Cyprian says, "Outside the Church is no salvation". Calvin: "Beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for"²². Cyprian argues that communion

18 See A. van de Beek, *Tussen traditie en vervreemding: over kerk en christen-zijn in een veranderende cultuur*, Callenbach, Nijkerk 1985, 129-131.

19 In the free churches the personal influence of the leader of the congregation is even far stronger. They have often absolute power, as they are not controlled by fellow bishops.

20 Van der Borgh, *Het ambt her-dacht*, 142-144.

21 IV,1,5

22 IV,1,4.

with the bishop represents communion with the Church. Calvin says that everybody, no one excluded, is required to submit themselves to the minister. He even compares them with the priests in the Old Testament²³.

With respect to this, it must be noticed that the reference to the Church as our Mother is absent in the first edition of the *Institutes*. In that edition, written in 1536, more stress is placed on the Church as a community, the people of God in Christ. Here Calvin primarily opposes the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In later editions Calvin increasingly accentuates the importance of Church organisation. The difference in the first sentence about the visible Church in the first and the fourth edition is remarkable. In 1536 Calvin begins: "We direct this argument not at all as a battle against the civil order of laws and lawgivers, but against the power that those who pretend to be shepherds of the Church claim for themselves, while in reality they are the worst tyrants"²⁴. In 1559 he begins: "But as it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church, let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government"²⁵. In his confrontations with the Anabaptists and the radical Reformation, Calvin becomes more and more convinced of the need for good structures. The radical Reformation rejected church organisation. They were people of the free Spirit. They had no need of offices, sometimes not even of a written Bible. Calvin was shocked by their arbitrariness and the consequences they draw from their opinions²⁶.

It is in that perspective that he takes up the metaphor of the Church as our Mother. Thus it is intended to strengthen the position of the Church. He does this explicitly in the context of the visible Church. In this context he connects the metaphor of the mother with the office of the pastor as preacher of the Word. The unity of the body of Christ is guaranteed in communion with the minister. "Although the power of God is not confined to external means, he has, however, confined us to his ordinary method of teaching, which method, when fanatics refuse to observe, they entangle themselves in many fatal snares"²⁷. That does not sound very much different from Cyprian. The only difference is that Calvin speaks about the minister and Cyprian about the bishop. But that is more a question of the level of aggregation than principal. Calvin sometimes speaks very simply about bishops. "To all who discharge the ministry of the word it [the Scripture] gives the name of bishops"²⁸. He only rejects the pope²⁹. But so did Cyprian³⁰. What is important for both is that there is a person who is appointed to save the people of God from heresy by right preaching, and thus right interpretation of the Word.

We can extend the similarities between Calvin and Cyprian even farther. Both oppose heresies. But both oppose schisms as well. Calvin is furious with the radical Reformation, as Cyprian is against the Novatians. Actually both had similar problems with their opponents. In the heart of their respective messages there was much agreement between Cyprian and Calvin on the one hand,

23 IV,1,5.

24 *Institutes 1536*, VI,2.

25 *Institutes* IV,1,4.

26 See W. Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse radicalen*, Ton Bolland, Amsterdam 1973: 240-254.

27 IV,1,5.

28 IV,3,8.

29 See esp. *Institutes* IV, 7.

30 See *Epist.* 33,1; 59,14; 66,8; 67,4; 73,7. See also the letter of Firmilian to Cyprian (*Epist.* 75,16). Cf. A. van de Beek, "The Dis-unity of the Reformed Churches": 109-133.

and the radical Christians on the other hand, about the gospel of Jesus Christ, about the Spirit, about true Christian life. If you are a Christian you must show yourself to be a Christian. "By their fruit you shall know them". That is particularly the case for the leaders of a community. Both the Radical Reformation and the Novatians therefore accentuated the personal spiritual attainments of their leaders. It seems to fit very well in the idea of spiritual men who are full of the Holy Spirit, who propagate the gospel and hand it on to the next generation. Nevertheless Cyprian argues in the other direction. It is not the spiritual power of a person that is a guarantee against deviations, but the wise judgement of the predecessors and the gathering of the bishops. Nobody can make himself a leader. Neither are the people empowered to choose their leaders, however spiritual and powerful these may seem. Only those who received the office from the apostolic succession are so empowered. Thus it is not about leadership as such that Cyprian is thinking. It is about a leadership that guarantees continuity and solid wisdom.

Cyprian does not deal formally with the structures of the Church. For him too the office is servant of the Word. The truth is the truth of the message. It is not the spiritual and enthusiastic life of the Christians. Ultimately the Novatians trust in themselves and in the purity of their leaders, just like the radical Reformation did. Orthodox Christianity keeps to the message of the apostles and of liberation in Christ only. That message is guarded by the official ministry. That is the core for both Cyprian and Calvin. Their thought in this respect is so very similar that actually Calvin explicitly used Cyprian's *About the Unity of the Church* for the fourth edition of his *Institutes*.

DIFFERENCES IN CONTEXT

That does not mean there are no differences. These are not however principally matters of fundamental theological positions, but of a different context. Cyprian had to deal with a long tradition of heretics with a Gnostic background and with radical Christians of the Novatian movement. Against them he can make his argument for the acknowledged offices without any reservation.

That is clearest in his resistance against the baptism bestowed by heretics and schismatics. For him too the office is servant of the Word. But precisely for that reason one cannot be born as a Christian, and thus be baptised outside communion with the acknowledged office. It is clear that for the early Church this was not mere formalism. It was aimed at preserving the unity as the unity of the truth of Christ. Therefore soon after Cyprian his successors dropped the formal rule. After long deliberations the Church decided in 314 at the Synod of Arles - and confirmed at Nicaea in 325 - that those who were baptised by heretics would be accepted in the bosom of the Church. If they converted and turned to the true bishop, they were in the communion of the truth. The bishop's office is not about formalism, but about keeping to the truth.

Calvin is in a different position from Cyprian. The profile of heretics was less clear in his days. Radical Christians were more the problem. Therefore he joins Cyprian in his plea for ministry. But Calvin cannot do so without keeping in mind another opponent, the Roman Catholic hierarchy. They claimed to be the true successors of the apostles. They were in a long tradition of apostolic succession. Thus they seem to be right. Against them Calvin had to stress that apostolic succession is not an aim in and of itself, not even acceptable as such, but is rather in service of the true tradition of the Word. Therefore he accentuates, far more than Cyprian does, the importance of the Word. Apostolic succession is not a succession of persons, but of the Word. It is not about formal ministry, but about right preaching. Nevertheless Calvin stresses the importance of office and ministry. The other pole of radical Christianity with its enthusiastic leaders is just as dangerous for the wisdom of God.

The tension that having to fight on two fronts causes for Calvin can be demonstrated by his interpretation of Cyprian about the way bishops are elected. Cyprian argues that both the fellow bishops and the people are to be involved in the election of a new bishop. Calvin interprets this in such a way that actually the people choose, and the bishops exercise control and prevent the people from ill-considered decisions³¹. The bishops, as wise men, are guardians of the election. Apostolic succession is not the issue for him. I think for Cyprian this was really important, as is clear from his opposition to schismatics' baptism. But Calvin interprets this in his own way in order to avoid Roman Catholic claims. Today we are in still a different position. We can stretch Calvin's interpretation forward and accentuate the people's choice, neglecting or minimising that he finds it necessary that the other bishops agree. We could also turn to a stricter interpretation of Cyprian, as I did before. If we see that Calvin feels very much akin to Cyprian, we should not stress the difference too much, and consider the context as we use their texts. We cannot deal with them ahistorically. We have to keep in mind that both oppose popular opinions of their days, in order to be faithful to the apostles' message.

IMPORTANCE FOR NOW

In Protestant churches people are inclined nowadays to stress freedom. There is an emphasis on enthusiasm and personal faith. There is also a tendency to minimise office. As a consequence we see an abundance of feeling, personal views, opinions. Often these lack profundity. Faith tends to become superficial. It tends also to become a supermarket product. We consume it for the taste of feeling good. Faith should not cost us anything. The way we deal with baptism is symptomatic of this. Some ministers give the impression they are afraid of water. Wetting just their fingertips, they baptise the child. It might get wet! Your life might be influenced by faith. Faith might cost you something. We want to be Christians, but only if it is to our advantage. We just need the stamp of God's safeguarding us. Other Christians opt for adult baptism. That does not mean it is more profound. It can become a spectacle, just to profile ourselves as born again persons. In both cases we lose the depth of the original message of the apostles: "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (1 Cor 2:2)

Our situation is far more similar to Cyprian's than to Calvin's. It is perhaps even worse. There is no danger from an authoritarian church which is only interested in power, as Calvin reproaches the Roman priests of his time. We are in danger from the many opinions and free leaders and contesting theologians. Often they can not even be compared with the radical Novatians or Anabaptists. Those were at least motivated Christians. Nowadays many Christians look for a Christian life that just supports their own religious feelings.

In this situation we need persons who are akin with the classic tradition of faith, and put that on the table and on the pulpit. We need people who are appointed by persons who know about that truth and were tested in their lives, acknowledged by the tradition of Christian faith. We may have many objections to Rome. But at least they hold to a tradition. We can critique them – but it is less than the critique that I have of the Reformed churches, divided, egoistic, superficial as they often are. We should turn away from our democratic ideology that suggests the majority of human beings are identical with the truth. Majority opinion has only brought deceit, and elevated the lie to rule. We need people who stand for the truth and are fully committed to it, not because they chose themselves, nor because a majority wanted them, but because persons in a long tradition know what is of lasting importance.

31 *Institutes* IV,3,15.

Does this imply that we should go to Rome in order to be ordained? Some Dutch theologians in the middle of the twentieth century thought so. Some indeed did go to Rome, such as Hendrik van der Linde, who later became a professor at the Catholic University in Nijmegen. Others went to the Church of England in order to be ordained, and then returned to the Reformed Church with that ordination, convinced that they were the only true ministers. They were convinced that ministry could not exist without apostolic succession. They were right. But they dealt with it formally. That was not even the case in the orthodox Church after Cyprian, as we saw. They forgot that ministry and apostolic succession are only a means to bring us to and keep us in communion with Christ, as Calvin writes. Protestants are inclined to stress that so very much that they forget we cannot do without the means. We need the Church, ministry, the office, a tradition handed down.

The famous Dutch theologian Arnold van Ruler also stressed the importance of apostolic succession. But he was not willing to go to Rome or Canterbury. He was too Reformed for that. In order to escape from the dilemma of being Reformed and convinced of the importance of apostolic succession at the same time, he turned to the idea of the *vir apostolicus*, the apostolic man³². In times of crisis in the Church God can call a person to bring the Church back to the roots. It is a specific calling, directly from God, without election and ordination by men. Such a person is in a situation similar to the apostles, who were also called directly by God. Luther and Calvin were such *vires apostolici*. Actually Calvin himself considered himself to be so called, without using the same title – or at least he considered his co-Reformers to be so, serving in an extraordinary office³³. The Church made a new start. Since pastors are ordained to the ministry by laying on of hands, we adhere to the opinion of Van Ruler in this new apostolic tradition, which is actually the true old apostolic tradition. It is not the erring tradition of Rome, but the renewed tradition of the true Word of God.

Actually, I do not think such a construction is very helpful. Precisely because it is about the Word of God, and not about ordination as such, we can deal with it practically. We can compare it with the practice of baptism by heretics or schismatics. Protestant ministry broke the chain of succession. But in sharing the one faith and joining the union of the one Church, Protestant office should be accepted. It is not about formalities, but about truth. But precisely because of that truth we should be very much aware of the importance of ministry. That ministry is not dependent on individuals, but belongs to a whole chain through time and a whole network in time. The personal presence of a bishop as a supralocal office is an important factor in this.

In the early Church the claim was that we should not separate from the bishop as the successor of the apostles. That does not mean we cannot express a critique of bishops. They must always be submitted to the Word. Precisely their position in the apostolic succession requires them to be faithful to the apostles' faith. Anyone who is unfaithful to that calling must be repudiated. But we cannot separate ourselves from him by our own choice. Human beings too easily deceive themselves, holding their own truth for the truth of God. In this case too the early Church shows us the way: the community of bishops must exclude a heretic or unfaithful bishop from their community. Be he *anathema* – set away!. We cannot create our own Church, we can only call on the one and indivisible Church of Christ to be faithful to her Lord and to hold to the apostolic witness.

32 A.A. van Ruler, *Reformatiorische opmerkingen in de ontmoeting met Rome*, Paul Brand, Hilversum/Antwerpen 1965: 29.

33 *Institutes* IV,3,4.

CARING FOR OUR MOTHER

I am worried about the Church. She does not actually persevere in her calling. Especially mainstream Protestant churches have no discipline, particularly no discipline in doctrine. Doctrine is not a set of statements to which people must subscribe. In both the early Church and for Calvin, doctrine is the living teaching of ministers, it is the way they lead the members of the body of Christ in God's truth and love. Does the Church keep its ministers in this discipline? I do not think so. Shall I then separate from that Church? Not at all. If I would do so, my new denomination will not be based on the way God leads his Church through the ages, but on my human decision to no longer accept the false doctrines and behaviour in the Church. If God had done the same, there would not have been any Church at all – from the very beginning. A perfect Church never existed. Shall I separate from that Church? Impossible. For she is my mother. And though she is failing and sometimes boring, though she is doing wrong to me and many other Christians, she is and remains my mother.

Actually my mother is a strange woman. She does everything God has forbidden. She mistreats her children. Other people say: "We do not understand why you are willing to stay with her for one day longer." And certainly they are right. But she is my mother. And precisely because she is such a wicked person, precisely because she is that ill, I love her the more. I grieve about her. I would like her to be healed and healthy. I would like her to be a living hymn to the glory of God. But she is not. And so she is my mother. And when I look to myself I see that I am her child indeed. It cannot be otherwise. But this mother, with this child, is loved by God.

Here I move from the Apostles' Creed to the Nicene Creed. The Apostles' Creed says, "I believe a holy catholic Church" – not: "I believe in the Church". The Nicene Creed confesses, "We believe *in* one holy Church"³⁴. First, "one" is inserted. There is only one Church. It is clear why in Reformed churches the Apostolic Creed is preferred. We also find "in". We believe in the Church. That means we trust in her. That is a confession of God's love and faithfulness. That is a confession of the remission of sins. Anyone who does not dare to confess "I believe in the Church" does not understand the way God saves human beings. God does so by that strange mother. With all her physical and psychological diseases, we would expect she would soon die. Actually we thought she would have already died a long time ago. But she is still alive. Even more than that: she brings forth more children, a new generation of people who believe in Christ. This fatally ill being gives birth to children of the living God. We believe in the Church. That confession is the highest confession of our belief in God.

It is precisely for this reason that we need the offices. If we neglect them we are inclined to see our own group as the best group on earth, not aware that we need critical distance. The office makes us keep in mind that we are controlled, and have to be controlled. The failure of office forces us keep in mind that we are not dependent on profound spiritual leaders, but on God who appoints wise persons to hand down his Word to a new generation of believers. And wise bishops know they should not seek perfect colleagues to appoint, but rather colleagues who know about the perfect love of God. Therefore the Nicene Creed says "we", and not "I", believe. Only in communion with sinners are we in the communion of the Church.

It is remarkable that the phrase about the Church does not belong to the earliest version of the Nicene Creed. At the council of Nicaea in 325 the creed ended abruptly with "and in the Holy

34 I here refer to the original Greek version, and not to the Latin translation. See H. Denzinger – A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. 34, Herder, Barcinone etc., 1967, 150.

Spirit.” There was nothing about the nature of the Spirit, nothing about the Church and eternal life. All these sentences were added at the council of Constantinople in 381. This was precisely the first council after the Church became the official faith of the Roman Empire. One Church reflected one Empire. The phrase reflects something of the downfall of the Church, no longer the Church of persecuted martyrs but the Church of imperial power. But it is precisely then the Church confesses, “We believe in one.... Church”. It is the paradox of faith to accept that confession, just like Calvin accepted that the council of the city of Geneva had such a lot of influence on the church. For the Word of God is not confined!