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The church we could be – What churches can learn from Calvin's congregational theology

ABSTRACT

This article deals with Calvin's understanding of congregations, their vital role in the unfolding of the Kingdom, and their ministry and structures.

It argues, firstly, that not enough attention is given to Calvin's congregational ecclesiology. Thinking about the life and the role of the congregation in Geneva was a central issue in the life and theology of John Calvin. He was not in the first place a professional theologian or teacher, but was the pastor of Geneva. His whole theology should be seen within its rootedness in his pastoral commitment and responsibilities.

It further argues that Calvin's acceptance of the call to Geneva probably had to do with his deep conviction that Christianity is not just a philosophy but that it can and should be practiced in life. This belief that the Gospel of Jesus Christ must and can be embodied in the lives of Christian communities (and through them in the world) was a basic tenet of Calvin's theology.

In the rest of the article attention is given to the way Calvin tried to accomplish this goal. It deals with his strong focus on God and the Gospel in the life of the congregation, on the ongoing ministry of the Ascended Christ through the Holy Spirit, on his understanding of our human ministry in obedience to Christ, and on the reformation and building of the congregation according to the word of God.

The last paragraph calls attention to Calvin's deep commitment to the unity of the church as a vital mark of the church of Jesus Christ.

Dirkie Smit's theological life and work has been marked by his interest in and commitment to the church.² Not only has he written several articles about the church, but his whole theology could be described as theology from and for the church. He took his calling as a minister and later as a teacher or doctor of the church very seriously. Earlier in his career Dirkie once told me that almost all his formal writing had been done in response to requests from the church.

As a practical theologian I have always valued this strong emphasis on the church. Not only because we had a knowledgeable and trusted guide in Dirkie Smit, but also because ecclesiology has been neglected in the past by some systematic theologians.

There is another reason why Dirkie's work on the church is held in such high esteem by practical theologians and pastors: He has an active interest in the congregational form of the church

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² Possibly the best summary of Dirkie's views can be found in an essay published in Burger and Nell (2002: 243-58).

and understands more about the practical life of and ministry in congregations than most academics. When it comes to congregations, the truth of the gospel does not only concern the narratives we tell and the doctrines we teach, but also a number of processes we use and the practices we follow. Dirkie Smit has a good grasp on and interest in these practices and processes, and is a wise and attentive conversation partner on such matters.

This article focuses on John Calvin's understanding of congregations and congregational ministry. Calvin has always been a major influence in Dirkie's work, but has become even more so during the past fifteen years. We know that Calvin was a pastor for most of his theological life. He did his scholarly work not for academia in the first place, but for the church, for pastors, congregations and congregants. Congregations and ministry were not only important themes in his writing; it helped shape his theology. Of all the Reformers, Calvin arguably had the most explicit ecclesiology. He spent more time than the others reflecting on the life of the church and even on the form of the church.

Before continuing, an important preliminary remark has to be made: Calvin's view of the church was never stagnant, but developed and grew. It is, for instance, widely acknowledged that Martin Bucer had a major impact on his thinking about the church in general and congregations in particular (cf. Van't Spijker 2009:51-67 for a good, brief overview of Calvin's time in Strasbourg). The distinction Calvin made between the visible and the invisible church serves as a good example of his changing views. In the beginning of his career one finds a strong emphasis on the reality of the invisible church. However, in the decades that followed, the emphasis on the visible church became stronger and stronger (Van't Spijker 1990:51,152; Hesselink 1997:157). This implies, for instance, that while Calvin initially defended a distinction between the visible and invisible church, it was not a vital part of his matured ecclesiology.

Within the limited framework of this article it will obviously be impossible to discuss Calvin's congregational theology in full.³ The specific question chosen to be reflected on here is, rather, what present day congregations that want to be faithful to the gospel can learn from Calvin's congregational ecclesiology. With this in mind, five central views will be briefly outlined and discussed.

THE RELATIVE UNIMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCH

One can only begin to fully comprehend the importance and meaning of the church if one recognises its position relative to God, the gospel and the kingdom. This was also an issue at the heart of the Reformation. The Reformation was primarily a movement protesting against a church that focused too much on itself, that saw itself as the designated substitute for God on earth and effectively taught people to live with and before the church rather than with and before God. The concept of *coram Deo* played a vital role in the theology of the Reformers (cf. Bakker's 1956 study on Luther). The essence of this concept is that we are not merely invited to live with the church or the priests (though they can help us immensely), but that we are invited by the gospel to an intimate life with God.

In Luther's theology this emphasis was very clear. His resistance against a "strong" well-structured church that took itself too seriously may help to explain why Luther did not pay that much attention to the development of an ecclesiology. While Calvin deviated from Luther

³ The better publications on Calvin's ecclesiology include Milner (1970), Van't Spijker (1990 and 2009), Hesselink (1997), Haight (2005), Partee (2005) and Faber (2009).

in this respect and viewed the development of an ecclesiology a worthwhile pursuit, he never forsook this original point of view of the Reformation. It is clearly reflected in the placement of the church in Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. He deals with it in Book Four, the last part of the Institutes, where it is referred to as "the external means by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein" (Inst. IV.I.1 heading). It can even be argued that Book Four should be seen as an addendum to the first three books and thus not as an intrinsic part of Calvin's theology proper. However, this may probably be taking the argument too far (Van't Spijker 1990:158). Calvin's argument in Book Four – that we believe the church and not "in" the church (Inst. IV.I.2) – confirms this understanding of the church.

Taking a cue from the structure of the Institutes, one could argue that the church should not exist to sustain itself, but to exalt God (Book One), to serve the kingdom of Christ (Book Two) and to reflect the work of the Holy Spirit embodying Christ's gifts in our lives (Book Three). Whether this was intentional or not, I believe that these three issues were at the heart of Calvin's theology. This point reflects a deep truth in his theology that does not require any extended argument. If we want to build the church and further the coming of the kingdom, the focus of our preaching and conversations in the church should be on these three themes and not in the first place on formal congregational concerns.

This primary focus on the Trinity and its work also sheds light on a more debatable point in Calvin's theology. In Reformed theology there has always been some difference of opinion on the specific order in which the loci connected to pneumatology should be discussed. Most theologians tend to follow Calvin's order and discuss the work of the Spirit in the lives of individuals prior to its work in the church. There are, however, a number of theologians – notably Hendrikus Berkhof and Abraham Kuyper – who choose to reverse this order. This is not a minor issue and it has been argued that such a reversal has implications for a church's operative ecclesiology. As will be seen in the next paragraph, Calvin's decision on this point should not be interpreted as a disregard of the importance of the church, but rather suggests a prioritisation of our relationship with God. Van't Spijker sees this as one of Calvin's deepest convictions. According to Van't Spijker, we are not assured in our faith by belonging to a church, but by being part of the body of Christ.⁴

This outward focus of the church is confirmed by Milner in his extensive study on Calvin's doctrine of the church. According to Milner, God's primary intention with the church was the restoration of order in the world (Milner 1970:194-196). Charles Partee summarises this as follows:

For Calvin the church is God's answer to the world's disorder. Although he did not use "missional" language, it is clear that Calvin knew that the intention was that the church's life and work should be directed towards the world outside (Partee 2008:259).

This is indeed one of the most important lessons that congregations may learn from Calvin today. Since Calvin's time many studies have shown that institutions have a life of their own and have a tendency to direct their energy inward to sustain them. Many churches and congregations have succumbed to this temptation. Sheldon Sorge explains that the present malaise in mainline churches in the West is to a large extent related to this misunderstanding of the purpose of a church. He maintains that "the church comes to exist as an end in itself It

4 "[N]iet, ik behoor tot de kerk en ben derhalve lid van Christus. Maar: ik ben een lidmaat van Christus en derhalve behoor ik tot de kerk" (1990:146,150).

becomes so wrapped up in concern that it continues to exist that the question of why it exists is forgotten. Its chief mission becomes its preservation.” This, however, cannot succeed since “[a] church that defines itself more by polity than by theology is sure to become exactly what it is trying to avoid: it will be increasingly fragmented and diffuse, until it eventually dissolves” (Sorge 2005:151,152).

The first lesson to learn from Calvin is that congregations should not make the church, its ministries or even its growth their centre of attention, but should focus on God, on Christ and on the work of the Spirit. My work at BUVTON⁵ taught me that God and the gospel of Christ need to be at the heart of any meaningful congregational reform. This realisation is supported by Sorge’s assertion that “being connectional” (a model followed by many mega churches) “flattens” the theology and the language of the church. “[This] terminology creates a world of ecclesial actuality that bears no inherent [clear] reference to God” (Sorge 2005:151).

THE VITAL ROLE OF THE CHURCH

However important the above statement is, it immediately needs to be stated in a more nuanced way. That the church should not be the centre of attention does not mean that the church is not fundamentally important in Calvin’s theology – Calvin reflected and wrote more extensively on the church than any of the Reformers of his day. The whole of Book Four (volume wise almost 40% of the Institutes) is dedicated to reflections on the church. To that must be added Calvin’s reflections on the church in his other writings – especially in his commentaries. There is, for instance, currently much interest in his remarks on the church in his Corinthian commentaries (Faber 2009:122).

Calvin did not only write extensively on the church; there is also a remarkable mindfulness, subtlety, maturity and moderation in his views on the church and congregational life. He always endeavoured to balance faithfulness to Scripture with a strong local and contextual awareness and this rare mix has sparked creative and fresh insights and recommendations (Faber 2009:123).

This commitment to what we today call “robust practical theological reflection” is not in the first place deeply connected to his thoughts on the church, but to the way he thought about God, the gospel and theology. This important statement needs to be substantiated with three explanatory remarks:

- First, we must always remember that the Reformation was not in the first place an academic pursuit, but a movement directed at fundamental renewal in the churches of the time. Reflection and theology – and eventually scholarly work – played an important part in this process, but the focus was always on what was happening in the church. This certainly applied to Luther and the first generation of reformers, but it was no different for Calvin.
- Second, we also need to remind ourselves that since 1536, Calvin’s primary work and concern he (was only 27 at the time) was his work as pastor of Geneva. It is true that he also served a wider cause, but even that wider cause was to a large extent, in his mind, also ecclesial (see, for example, his endeavours concerning the unity of the church). Calvin wrote the Institutes to assist congregants in their daily reading and interpretation

⁵ Buro vir Voortgesette Teologiese Onderrig (Bureau for Continued Theological Training).

of the Bible. In his commentaries one can also see the central place pastoral and ecclesial questions occupied in his mind.

- Third, Calvin's commitment to take theology to the church should be understood on a deeper level. It was far more than a matter of a natural inclination or an aptitude for practical matters; it was integral to the way Calvin thought about the gospel. For Calvin the dearest truth and the greatest marvel of the gospel was the fact that it could be enfleshed in real life. In his understanding, the gospel not only concerned ideas and concepts or a new way of thinking about life; it was (S)omething that could become a reality in life that could be practised and embodied in real life. That was probably his greatest challenge when he eventually accepted the invitation to work in Geneva. This move indicated that he ultimately believed that the gospel could and should be practiced and exemplified in the church. In his *Johannes Calvin's Theology – Eine Einführung*, Georg Plasger (2008:107) reflects this view well in the title of his chapter on Calvin's ecclesiology "Die von Gott erwählte und zu gestaltende Kirche". The election of God has to be embodied in the life of the congregation. That this perspective indeed played a major role in Calvin's thought on the gospel is confirmed by the statement he made towards the end of his life that, when he came to Geneva, there was only preaching in and no reform of the church (Van't Spijker 1990:144). The former, to Calvin's mind, could never be enough. The truth of gospel can and should be reflected in the life of the church.

Many commentators will agree with the statement of John Hesselink that Calvin held a high doctrine of the church (Hesselink 1997:154). Some of Calvin's statements on the church in Inst. IV.I.14 sound almost Roman Catholic! He called the church "our mother" and agreed with Cyprian that there can be no real salvation outside the church. We cannot have God as our Father without having the church as our mother. In his commentary on Isaiah 34:24 Calvin wrote:

Apart from the body of Christ and the fellowship of the godly, there can be no hope of reconciliation with God. It follows those strangers who separate themselves from the church have nothing left for them than to rot amidst their curse.

In spite of the way he ordered the loci in his pneumatology, Calvin could in no way be associated with the prevailing low ecclesiology that we find in evangelical churches and even in many Reformed and Presbyterian congregations. This – in my opinion – is one of the most urgent issues that Reformed churches need to address. There seems to be a drift in Reformed and Presbyterian churches towards a lower ecclesiology, one where the individual almost always comes before the group. This confused prioritisation can be linked with an even worse "narrative", namely the notion that the transformation of individuals is the work of the Spirit, but the founding (and, therefore, the ownership!) of congregations is merely a human endeavour. This – I believe – is ultimately the basis of most evangelical ecclesiologies and has contributed to struggles towards church unity.

MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH: GOD'S MINISTRY AND OUR MINISTRY

In Calvin's writings on the church he places a strong emphasis on ministry. This shows that he views what is done (that is, ministry) in the church as more fundamental than the way in which the church is structured or organised.

Calvin's most revolutionary ecclesiological point of view may indeed be his conviction that Jesus Christ, working through the Holy Spirit, is the primary Minister in the church. No one wrote more clearly and convincingly about this on-going ministry of Christ. For Calvin there clearly are two phases in the work of Jesus Christ: The first phase was Jesus' earthly life and ministry – from his incarnation to his death and resurrection. This phase of his work was reported in the narratives of the four Gospels. The second phase started with Jesus' ascension and was based on his enthronement and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. This second phase of Christ's work was reported in Acts and in the rest of the New Testament. Calvin strongly emphasised the continuing work of Christ and highlighted that Christ is Himself involved in this work. Towards the end of Book Two of the Institutes (*Inst.* II.XV), when Calvin speaks of Jesus as our Prophet, Priest and King, this does not refer to Jesus' earthly work but to his on-going work after his ascension. Although He could no longer be seen by ordinary human eyes, it does not make this part of Jesus' work less real or important.

In this second phase the church and believers are included in God's work – we hear that the Spirit was poured out on human beings and filled them. Although Calvin believed that Christ used human offices and agents for this work, he never compromised the Christological reality of this cooperative ministry. Without losing either the Christological or the human sides, the two were joined in a mysterious way in and through the work of the Spirit.

For Calvin the ascension formed the basis of this second part of Jesus' ministry on our behalf. Jesus' ascension was not merely a return to heavenly rest after a completed mission, but the beginning of a new involvement with our salvation. Jesus reigns over church and world as King and will bring history to a good conclusion; as Priest he not only pleads for us with the Father, but in his divinity He remains with us every step of our way here on earth (Mt 28:20; Eph 4:10); and as our Prophet, Jesus is revealing God's on-going work to us, teaching us God's will and, through the Spirit, He is constantly transforming us more and more into his own image.

That God's agency in the world – through Christ and the Spirit – is indeed a reality was also clearly reflected in Calvin's strong views on the centrality of prayer. Towards the end of Book Three (*Inst.* III.XX) he wrote a lengthy exposition on prayer, "which is the chief exercise of faith and by which we daily receive God's benefits". It is evident from this chapter that, for Calvin, the church was wholly dependent not only on God's gracious gifts, but also on his God's on-going care and his on-going ministry amongst us and in the world. The best we can do is to acknowledge our dependence and plead with God to continue and to conclude his work.

If it is abundantly clear that God's on-going agency amongst us is not merely a way of speaking, but indeed a kind of unique historical reality, we can briefly discuss the role and ministry of believers and the human offices.

Calvin's strong emphasis on Christ's ministry and the work of the Spirit did not prevent him from also accentuating the importance of human ministries. He dealt with it from early on in his exposition on the church. Although there "are many reasons why God prefers to do his work through humans" rather than angels, Calvin did not elaborate on them all (*Inst.* IV. III. 1). One of the reasons was the fact that God "does not dwell amongst us in a visible presence". He explains this in a way that helps us see the delicate balance:

[W]e have said that He uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honour, but only that through their mouths He may do his own work – just as a workman uses a tool to his work (*Inst.* IV.III.1).

Although pastors should always be aware of their total dependence on God and should never try to be more than what they are or try to hide their inefficiencies, they play a vital role in God's economy. They are "the chief sinew by which believers are held together in one body" (Inst. IV.III.2). Calvin had been known to use emphatic language to describe the pivotal role envisioned for the officers of the church:

[F]or neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food or drink, are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth (Inst. IV.III.2).

There was another reason for this strong language. It did not only have to do with a high view of the office, but was also motivated by Calvin's views on the importance of human faith and obedience for the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation. Compared to Luther, Calvin was more mindful of how a too strong emphasis on Christ's work as the "Author and Perfecter of our faith" might diminish the role of faith and even obedience and sanctification. This is also the reason why Calvin made a small addition to Luther's classic description of the means of grace. Luther described the regular and valid "preaching of the Word God" as the primary means of grace. Calvin agreed with Luther, but he added "and hearing" after the word "preaching". The intention was clear: Our task is not completed when we have preached the Word; the Word should be taken seriously, pondered upon and should inspire our decisions and actions. Therefore, Christ's ministry through the Spirit and our human ministry were not viewed as conflicting or exclusive in any way. Through the Spirit a mysterious cooperation emerges between these two ministries.

The deep, mysterious and intricate unity between the ministry of Jesus and our ministry was central in Calvin's understanding of the characteristics of the true Church. Preaching and the sacraments were seen as the primary means of grace not because of instrumental reasons, because there was something unique in words or in bread and wine itself that could change people's lives. They were designated and instituted by Christ as the means by which he chose to be present and through which he chose to come to the church! The deeper question does not concern the subtle, secretive, miraculous workings of preaching and the sacraments, but the question of how and where the Lord Jesus Christ chose to be present and working after his ascension! The secret behind the ministry of the Word and sacrament does not in the first place concern what and how we do it, but rather that Christ is present and working in and through them.

RE-FORMING AND BUILDING THE CONGREGATION ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Calvin almost always had local congregations in mind when he wrote and reflected on the church. His shift in emphasis from the invisible church to concrete visible congregations was related to this growing interest in and concern with real life congregations. In fact, the re-formation according to the Word of God of his congregation in Geneva was probably often at the centre of Calvin's reflections and deliberations about the church. After his return from Strasbourg his plans for congregations was foremost in his thoughts.

This section aims to give a brief overview of Calvin's congregational ecclesiology. How did Calvin think about congregations, their ministry, their structure and their reform? The focus is on five components or levels of Calvin's view.

First, we need to acknowledge Calvin's explicit commitment to orientate his thoughts on the congregation according to Holy Scripture (cf. Wendel 2000:302). He believed that Rome's mistake was to introduce ministries and ways of doing that had no biblical basis. So strictly did Calvin adhere to this principle that he sometimes seemed to apply it in an almost too simplistic way. In practice Calvin was more open and pragmatic and wisely acknowledged that these were new times and new situations (cf. Van't Spijker's remarks in this regard 1990:157).

Similar to Luther, Calvin believed that God builds his church primarily through the Word and sacraments. At times Luther added more means of grace and Bucer – and the later Reformed tradition – added church discipline as a third means. However, Calvin consistently recognised only Word and sacrament as the two basic means of grace. Much has been written on this theme – not all of it helpful. There are three factors that we need to keep in mind if we want the right understanding of Calvin's point of view.

The first factor was referred to in the previous paragraph, namely Calvin's emphasis on the special place of preaching and sacrament. This has to be understood against the backdrop of the more fundamental question of Christ's presence and agency. Word and sacrament are central means because they were chosen and instituted by Christ as ways to experience his real presence.

Second, we should see the focus on Word and sacrament as a reference to the congregation's worship service as the primary place of encounter with the living Christ. The most important experience of Christ in the life of the congregation was not in the church structures, institution or the offices, but in the weekly meeting between the congregation and its Lord in the worship service.

Third (and that also brings us to next perspective), we can and must not underestimate the role of the offices in the ministry of Word and sacrament. Calvin was always rightly cautious not to make the efficiency of the means dependent on the performance (or even status) of the offices. However, this downplaying of the importance of the offices must be understood as a reaction against the situation in the Roman church where everything depended on the higher offices. I do believe that in Calvin's operative ecclesial theology the offices and the reality of leadership played a critically important role – although this may not always be evident unless one views his formal theological writings in context.

We should also remember that the main complaint of the Reformers against the Roman Catholic understanding of the offices was related to the excessive power of the priest and especially that of the hierarchical order. Calvin assigned a prominent role to the offices. One of his most significant contributions to congregational theology was his recovery of the four offices found in Scripture and in the early church. Because we have been following Calvin's tradition for centuries, we tend to overlook the revolutionary implications of this at that time.

Fourth, Calvin not only restored the four offices but also understood that, for the sake of efficiency, next to the offices, institutions were required. Some regard this as Calvin's most important contribution and sees his genius as a talent for institutional thinking. It is remarkable that he could envision an institution to structure and organise the work of each of the offices – and in such detail. Alongside the deacons Calvin proposed the diaconal ministries; the work of the elders was structured by way of the consistory meetings; the pastors were organised to form the so called Company of Pastors, the forerunner of the presbytery; and the teaching ministry was formed into the Academy.

Finally, one should attend to the role of the Spirit in the embodiment of the gospel in the congregation. The Spirit not only gives the church the power for its work, but also guides it with wisdom in choosing how to approach this work. Although Calvin was highly committed to the authority of Scripture, he was not what we today would call “fundamentalist”. There always existed a certain freedom when it came to the embodiment of the gospel in new situations. This had to do with the combination of Word and Spirit which Calvinist churches must take care not to lose because this combination remains the surest way towards responsible reform and renewal. Historically, Reformed churches tended to be too rigid in their attempts to renew congregations and they have often not taken the Spirit as seriously as they should have. Today many congregations show greater openness to listen to the Spirit. This should be commended – as long as we remember that this should be accompanied by an even deeper process of listening to Scripture and tradition!

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Of all the Reformers Calvin arguably had the deepest commitment to the unity of the church and in this he remains an inspiration to modern day Reformed and Presbyterian churches. His role in the discussions on Holy Communion and his famous letter to Bishop Cranmer bears testimony to this commitment. In light of this it is ironic that Calvinist churches today are amongst the most divided Christian groups in the world.

The problem seems to be that in many of our churches unity is seen as important but not central. It is part of the wellbeing of the church but not part of its being and fundamental identity. Such a view can never be associated with Calvin. Because the church's life came from Christ Himself, the unity of the body is non-negotiable. This is clear in Calvin's writings:

All the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together in one body, being joined and knit together as are the limbs of one body. They are made truly one since they live together in one hope, faith and love and in the same Spirit of God (*Inst.* VI.I.2).

Calvin emphasised the importance of the unity of the body: “For no hope of future inheritance remains to us unless we have been united with all other members under Christ, our Head” (*Inst.* IV.I.2). It is remarkable that Calvin, reputed to have been very strict regarding doctrine, was very open when it came to honouring and appreciating the faith of other Christians. He pleaded for unity in the central doctrines of the faith, but did not think, for example, that differences of a practical nature should stand in the way of unity. This is yet another indication of gravity of this issue for him.

It is not clear why many Evangelical and Calvinist churches, that would like to see themselves as part of the Reformed tradition, fail to reflect the commitment of the great reformer to the unity of the church. The reason for this needs urgent investigation and reflection. A low ecclesiology (which ultimately means that the church is our creation and property) is probably part of the problem. We need to see the connection between Christ and his body more clearly. However, there might be an additional problem: Ellwood (2009:91-94) sees a connection between these problems and Calvin's views on authority in the church, which he believes was well intended but inadequate and naive in practice. Perhaps the time has come for a deep and thorough process of reflection on Calvin's fundamental ecclesiology, his views on unity and the expression of unity in the Reformed tradition, and how all of these relate to the question of final authority in the church.

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KEY WORDS

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