

Calvin on the Pastor and Community

By Rich Lusk

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Book 4 of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is a classic work of ecclesiology. This book is the longest section of the *Institutes*, showing Calvin's deep interest in and love for the church. Among its many salutary features is a full scale exposition of those ecclesiastical leaders Calvin called the "Doctors and Ministers" of the church. In it, Calvin takes up such pertinent questions as, Why is church office necessary? What functions do ordained men carry out? How does the pastoral office relate to Christ's headship over the church and to the priesthood of all believers? While we will not examine Calvin's full-orbed theology of ministry here, there are several interesting aspects of his understanding of the rationale for the ministry that are worthy of careful attention.

Calvin begins with two presuppositions. First, he assumes that there is a divine plan for the polity of the church. While God has not revealed his will on every detail of church organization, he has made clear, at least in broad outline, how the church's community life should be structured. Church government is not left entirely to the wisdom and whims of men; it is to be derived from the Scriptural blueprint. Second, Calvin begins with the acknowledgement that Christ alone is the Lord and Head of his church. Over and against the claims of the popes and various civil magistrates who had attempted to seize Christ's position for themselves, Calvin insisted that Christ alone has the right to govern his people. Whatever authority is exercised in the church must be understood as belonging ultimately to Christ. The Reformation valiantly recovered the doctrine of Christ's Headship over the church against usurpers.

But if all authority and power in the church belongs to Christ, what place, then, can there be for the ordained ministry? What function can pastoral officers serve? Calvin answers:

Nevertheless because [Christ] does not dwell among us in visible presence [Mt. 26:11], we 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 honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work – just as a workman uses a tool to do his work. I am constrained once more to repeat what I have already explained. He could indeed do it either by himself without any sort of aid or instrument, or even by angels; but there are many reasons why he prefers to do it by means of men (4.3.1).

So Calvin says that Christ has appointed ministers as his instruments and tools. He works through them and by them to apply his work of redemption to the elect. There are "many reasons" for this mode of operation, as Calvin says. But what are those reasons? Why has Christ chosen to delegate his power to representative men within the covenant community? How does the ordained office serve the glory of Christ and the good of his people? Calvin gives a threefold rationale for the ordained ministry.

First, Christ wishes to bestow this honor on certain men, and through them, on humanity as a whole. By selecting and gifting certain men to be pastors, he shows that he desires for all of us to participate in his work. Certain men are set aside to be his spokesmen. He makes their lips and tongues his own. He acts through them to baptize, preach, absolve, and serve the Eucharist. But the special functions given to a few remind all of us that we have been given dignity and honor. We are not all mouths (pastors and teachers), but we are all members of the same body of Christ. As Calvin says, "[B]y this evidence, he proves it to be no idle speaking that he often calls them his temples [1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16]." Christ has gifted each of his members for service in various ways. Pastors are specially gifted for a special role within the larger body.

This ministry of men is to be treasured by us. God works ordinarily through the inconspicuous outward means of Word, sacraments, and pastor. We should receive the ministry of pastors as the ministry of Christ himself (Mt. 10:40). We dare not rebel against the pastoral ministry. After all, "[T]hrough the ministers to whom he has entrusted this office and has conferred the grace to carry it out, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the church. And he shows himself as though present by manifesting the power of his Spirit in this institution, that it be not vain or idle. Thus, the renewal of the saints is accomplished . . ." (4.3.2).

The ministry of the Word is not degraded by being entrusted to humans. Calvin says,

Those who think the authority of the Word of God is dragged down by the baseness of the men called to teach it disclose their own ungratefulness. For, among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them . . . [A]lthough God's power is not bound to outward means, he has nonetheless bound us to this ordinary manner of teaching . . . But in every age the prophets and godly teachers have had a difficult struggle with the ungodly, who in their stubbornness can never submit to the yoke of being taught by human word and ministry. This is like blotting out the face of God which shines upon us in teaching. Believers were bidden of old to seek the face of God in the sanctuary [Ps. 105:4], as is oftentimes repeated in the law [Ps. 27:8; 100:2; 105:4; 1 Chron. 16:11; 2 Chron. 7:14] for no other reason than that for them the teaching of the law and the exhortations of the prophets were a living image of God, just as Paul asserts that in his preaching the glory of God shines in the face of Christ [2 Cor. 4:6]. (4.1.5)

Second, the ordained office is a cause for humility. We must learn to receive the Word of God from other men, even though they may very well be inferior to us in various capacities. Calvin explains:

[T]his is the best and most useful exercise in humility, when he accustoms us to obey his Word, even though it be preached through men like us and sometimes even by those of lower worth than we. If he spoke from heaven, it would not be surprising if his sacred oracles were to be reverently received without delay by the ears and minds of all. For who would not dread the presence of his power? Who would not be stricken down at the sight of such great majesty? Who would not be confounded at such boundless splendor? But when a puny man risen from dust speaks in God's name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we show ourselves teachable toward his minister, although he excels us in nothing (4.3.1).

It takes great humility on the part of the congregation to sit at the feet of a mere man to learn divine truth. After all, the ordained man is fallible. He is limited. He will make mistakes, misspeak, and even sin. He is often inferior in intelligence and speaking ability to those who must learn from him. Many in the congregation will ordinarily excel the pastor in various ways. And yet all are expected to humbly receive God's truth from him. In this way, God trains us all in modesty and meekness. Christ cultivates humility and teachableness in the body by organizing it around a weak and frail representative of himself [Of course, it also requires a great deal of humility on the part of Christ to allow himself to be represented by such feeble instruments!].

We've seen how the ordained ministry dignifies humanity and humbles the congregation. But perhaps the most important rationale for the ministry is Calvin's *third* reason. The ordained ministry builds community:

Further, nothing fosters mutual love more fittingly than for men to be bound together by this bond: one is appointed pastor to teach the rest, and those bidden to be pupils receive the common teaching from one mouth. For if anyone were sufficient to himself and needed no one else's help (such is the pride of human nature), each man would despise the rest and be despised by them. The Lord has therefore bound his church together with a knot that he foresaw would be the strongest means of keeping unity, while he entrusted to men the teaching of salvation and everlasting life in order that through their hands it might be communicated to the rest.

The pastor is to be a public symbol of the church's unity and community. The ministry is a vivid reminder that we need each other. We cannot go it alone. We are not self-sufficient. We cannot grow as Christians in isolation. We can be "self-taught" in many areas, but Christian truth and living are not among them. This knowledge and these skills can only be acquired in the context of community life. We are mutually dependent. God has bound us together by putting us under the teaching ministry of the pastor. This is the "knot" that binds us together; we dare not loosen it.

Calvin cites Eph. 4:4-16 to prove his point. Paul moves from, "There is one body . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism," (4:6-8) to "He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith . . ." This is a seamless flow of thought, according to Calvin. The purpose of the work of the ministry is to build up the body into a unified organism, "joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, [and] causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love." The ordained ministry exists in order to make the invisible unity we share in Christ a visible, public reality. The ministry's function is to make our immature and imperfect unity mature and complete.

While Calvin no doubt valued the private reading of Scripture, he argued this did not make the gathered worship assembly unnecessary. In 4.1.5, he says,

Fanatical men, refusing to hold fast to it [that is, to the church's public teaching ministry], entangle themselves in many deadly snares. Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence, they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. But, since they do their utmost to sever or break the sacred bond of unity, no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions . . . [B]elievers have no greater help than public worship, for by it God raises his own folk upward step by step.

In today's world, Calvin's view may seem antiquated. With the advent of mass communication methods, who needs a pastor? We can get all the teaching we need from readily available theology books, the internet, newsletters, magazines, journals, radio, television, and whatnot. Isn't Calvin's view out of date? After all, in his day, not every Christian family could even own a copy of the Scriptures. The lack of technology made everyone dependent on a central teaching figure.

Certainly, our easy access to so much information changes things considerably. But in many ways, our situation proves Calvin's point. The proliferation of information has had several effects at once. It has certainly made it possible for the ordinary Christian to become far more knowledgeable in theology. But it has also torn apart the Christian community. We have fragmented the church at higher levels into denominations and para-church organizations, often specializing in this or that aspect of Christian living. At the local level, parish churches often have many who are well versed in biblical truth, but hunger and ache for real community. Their heads are filled, but they feel empty inside because they lack any sense of belonging to a unified, close-knit church family.

The answer is not a rejection of technology, but a more mature use of the media available to us. Perhaps now, in our time and place, it requires more humility than ever to sit at the feet of the local pastor and learn. Better preaching, after all, might be available on tape or radio. More exciting teaching might be on offer in the latest issue of *Credenda Agenda* or *Modern Reformation*. Better scholarship might be found in the latest theological journals or on the internet. But none of these resources lessens our need for the local church, gathered around the pastor, to receive Word and sacrament, each Lord's Day. This how God has promised to work: the body gathers around one man who has been appointed as Christ's special representative; through him and from him, they receive the gifts of the kingdom in the means of grace. God can certainly work through radio preachers and internet essays. But he has promised to be present *uniquely and powerfully* in the gathered community of the local church. To forsake that assembly is to shut your ears up to God.

If Christian faith was a mere ideology, we might have outgrown the need for a central teacher in the local community. We could learn the content of the faith in private study. But biblical religion is not just a set of ideas or doctrines we subscribe to. It is a holistic way of living; it is life in community with other sinners-saved-by-grace; it is ministering, missioning, fellowshiping, ritualizing, celebrating, and maturing together. Faith needs more than book-learning to grow. Our faith is often challenged and nourished most by the trials and triumphs, the tribulations and joys, of living in close-knit community. By rubbing shoulders with one another, iron sharpens iron. Sparks may fly from time to time, but the end result is that we are sharpened and our rough edges are smoothed over. By helping one another through good times and bad, we not only learn how to apply our storehouse of theological knowledge; we actually accumulate wisdom we could never garner out of academic Bible studies. By working through differences in the body with patience and charity, we gain a broader understanding of God's truth.

This is God's plan for us. After all, God did not promise, "I will be your God, and you will be my *persons*." He said, "I will be your God, and you will be my *people*." And those people are bound together by more than a creed. The tie that binds includes the mind, but goes to the heart.

Obviously, the pastor has a critical role to play in this kind of community life. This is why Calvin says, "This human ministry which God uses to govern the church is the chief sinew by which believers are held together in one body . . . Whoever is trying to abolish this order of which we speak and this kind of government, or discounts it as not necessary, is striving for the undoing or rather the ruin and destruction of the church. For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and 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 (4.3.2).