

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# THE MINISTRY IN THE EARLY CHURCH AS SEEN BY JOHN CALVIN

by J. F. PETER

**T**HE substance of this paper was presented to the Queensland Faith and Order Committee at its meeting on July 10, 1961. Last year Mr. Peter resigned from the Chair of Theology at Emmanuel College in the University of Queensland, in order to become Federal Supervisor of Religious Broadcasts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission. To have responsibility for all the A.B.C. religious programmes in both sound radio and television is a great opportunity which he has found both challenging and fascinating. We hope that he will still have time to send us occasional contributions of the quality of the one which follows.

**T**HE title given to this paper will indicate that it is not just one more account of what was done and thought by the early Christian Church concerning itself and its ministry. Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth a declaration of those things, it seemed good to me to approach the subject in a different way, and to ask what grounds John Calvin had for thinking of the Early Church in the way that he did, and whether there are grounds for continuing to think of it in that way. And when there is had in mind the influence which Calvin's understanding has had upon large sections of the Christian Church, it is evident that an enquiry along these lines can be of considerable value.

What is said here is divided into three parts. There is offered, first, a summary of the chief things said by Calvin concerning the ministry. There follows, secondly, an indication of Calvin's own understanding of the relationship between his thought and that of the early fathers. Finally, there is some discussion concerning the significance of these things for our own day.

## I

In the prosecution of his twofold design in that work—a design which relates, first, to the knowledge of God and secondly, to the knowledge of ourselves—the author of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*,<sup>1</sup> according to the "General Syllabus"<sup>2</sup> which is often

<sup>1</sup> First published in 1534 or 1535, the *Institutes* underwent considerable revision and expansion, in both Latin and French editions, during the succeeding quarter of a century. Quotations in this paper are from the

[Continued at foot of next page

prefixed to it,

strictly follows the method of the Apostles' Creed, as being most familiar to all Christians. For as the Creed consists of four parts, the first relating to God the Father, the second to the Son, the third to the Holy Spirit, the fourth to the Church; so the author distributes the whole of this work into four Books, corresponding respectively to the four points of the Creed.<sup>2</sup>

It is then to Book IV—entitled “The External Means or Aids by which God Invites us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein”—that we should look for the normative expression of Calvin's views concerning the church and its ministry.<sup>4</sup>

The reader is immediately struck with the regard in which the author holds the church, “into whose bosom”, he says,

God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith” (IV. i. 1).

He writes again:

Where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time being no deceitful or ambiguous form of the church is seen; and no one is permitted to spurn its authority, flout its warnings, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements—much less to desert it and break its unity. For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished (IV. i. 10).

In such words, let there be no mistake, Calvin is speaking of

most recently published translation into English—that by F. L. Battles in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols. XX and XXI, which is based on the Latin edition of 1559.

<sup>2</sup> This “General Syllabus”, which is included in many editions of the *Institutes*, is taken from *Institutio religionis Christianae epitome ex Institutionibus Joh. Calvini excerpta*, by Kaspar Olevianus, published at Herborn in 1586.

<sup>3</sup> The approximation in form to the Creed is more obvious in the later editions; this may well indicate that Calvin's appreciation of the manner in which doctrine was expounded in the early church increased as the years passed.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have warned against treating the *Institutes* as a “system” (Karl Barth, preface to *Calvin; Textes choisis*. Librairie Universelle de France, 1948), and against reading it in isolation from the *Commentaries* (T. H. L. Parker, *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, xx [1948], p. 295). But Calvin's own estimate of the work (see “John Calvin to the Reader”, last paragraph) justifies our seeking the “normative expression” of his views there.

the visible church. Those who write in tones which suggest that Calvin discounted the visible church in favour of an "invisible" one show themselves to have scarcely considered what he has to say on the subject.<sup>5</sup>

It may be expected that a man who thinks so highly of the Church will not sit lightly to its historical development, or regard as of no consequence the manner in which it has been ordered. This expectation is realized in the case of Calvin, and nowhere more clearly than in his understanding of the ministry—"a ministry Christ so ordained in the church that, if destroyed, the up-building of the church would fail" (IV. i. 11).

We shall summarize his view of the ministry in four points.

1. The work of the ministry is primarily that of administering the Word and the Sacraments.

He lays great emphasis upon the work of preaching.

God, in order that the preaching of the Gospel might flourish, instituted "pastors and teachers" through whose lips He might teach His own, and thus He furnished them with authority (IV. i. 1). "The preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors" (IV. i. 5). "For the preaching of the word the ministry instituted by Christ is preserved" (IV. i. 7). God not only desires us to be attentive to the reading the law,

but also appoints instructors to help us by their effort. This is doubly useful. On the one hand he proves our obedience by a very good test when we hear his ministers speaking just as if he himself spoke. On the other, he also provides for our weakness in that he prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away (IV. i. 5).

Calvin is equally insistent, though less eloquent,<sup>6</sup> upon the place of the Sacraments, which have been entrusted to the ministers as seals of the Word, and may not be administered by anyone else (IV. xv. 20, 22).

2. The ministry has responsibility for the government of the church.

Calvin speaks of "ecclesiastical power" as having three parts: doctrinal, legislative and jurisdictional (IV. viii. 1). These he explains as, respectively, "authority to lay down articles of faith and authority to explain them" (IV. viii. 1), authority to make

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the term "invisible church" does not occur in the *Institutes* (though there are places where he comes close to it: IV. i. 3, 7), and very little space is given to the concept.

<sup>6</sup> The probable reason for this is that it was common for people of his day to elevate the Sacraments to the neglect of the Word. He does, of course, give a good deal of attention to questions relating to the correct understanding and right administration of the Sacraments.

laws ensuring concord and dignity in regard to worship and the general procedures of the Christian community (IV. x. 27, 28, 29), and authority to see "that offences be resisted and any scandal that has arisen be wiped out" (IV. xi. 5). It will be useful to say something about each of these, noting first Calvin's insistence that whatever is said about the power of the church must be referred to the purpose for which it is given, namely:

for upbuilding and not for destruction. Those who use it lawfully deem themselves no more than servants of Christ, and at the same time servants of the people in Christ. Now the only way to build up the church is for the ministers themselves to endeavour to preserve Christ's authority for himself; this can only be secured if what he has received from his Father be left to him, namely, that he alone is the schoolmaster of the church (IV. viii. 1).

For the proper expression of Christ's authority in his church, Calvin sees ecclesiastical power as exercised in the following way.

(a) Authority in doctrine rests upon the Word set down in the Scriptures, and by this standard the teaching of the church must be governed.

Here, then, is the sovereign power by which the pastors of the church, by whatever name they be called, ought to be endowed. That is that they may boldly do all things by God's Word. . . . Yet this . . . is the difference between the apostles and their successors: the former were sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit, and their writings are therefore to be considered oracles of God; but the sole office of others is to teach what is provided and sealed in the Holy Scriptures (IV. viii. 9).

It is given to no one within the church, either individually or corporately, to set up any new doctrine, or to offer an infallible interpretation of any doctrine: all pronouncements are to be brought to the test of Scripture.

Calvin is not blind to the possibility of disagreement concerning what the Scripture teaches; and it is in the settlement of such disputes that he sees the place of church councils in regard to doctrinal authority.

We indeed willingly concede, if any discussion arises over doctrine, that the best and surest remedy is for a synod of true bishops to be convened, where the doctrine at issue may be examined. Such a definition, upon which the pastors of the church in common, invoking Christ's Spirit, agree, will have much more weight than if each one, having conceived it separately at home, should teach it to the people, or if a few private individuals should compose it. Then, when the bishops are assembled, they can more conveniently deliberate in common what they ought to teach, and in what form, lest diversity breed offences. . . . If anyone disturb the church with a strange doctrine, and the matter reach the point that there is danger of greater dissension, the churches should first assemble, examine the question put, and finally, after due discussion, bring forth a definition derived from

Scripture which would remove all doubt from the people and stop the mouths of wicked and greedy men from daring to go any farther (IV. ix. 13).

Though there may be some doubt as to just who are involved when "the churches" assemble, there can be no doubt as to where Calvin considers the authority in doctrinal matters to lie—it lies with the pastors or bishops, who are bound to the Scriptures and are to take counsel when differences of interpretation arise.

(b) Authority in legislation has as its aim the laying down of laws which will ensure the proper worship of God without impairment of spiritual freedom (IV. x. 1). Such laws serve as a bond of union (IV. x. 27), but they are not to be considered as necessary for salvation (IV. x. 27, 30), and are to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age (IV. x. 30).

Calvin does not say in whose hands the power of making such laws should lie—perhaps this is itself one of the matters "to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age"—but it may be safely assumed that he would regard the ministry as having always a place of considerable influence.

(c) Authority in jurisdiction depends upon the power of the keys which Christ gave to the church and, since admonitions and corrections cannot be made without investigation of the cause, courts of judgment have been established in the church from the beginning. It is for the exercise of the power of the keys in this way that there are appointed some presbyters who rule but do not labour in the Word (IV. xi. 1); these he refers to in at least one other place as "elders" (IV. iii. 15).

Calvin distinguishes between the power of forgiving and retaining sins, which is referred solely to the ministry, and that of excommunication which is entrusted to the church.

Of the first he says:

The mission of reconciliation has been entrusted to the ministers of the church and by it they are repeatedly to exhort the people to be reconciled to God in Christ's name. Therefore, in the communion of saints, our sins are continually forgiven us by the ministry of the church itself when the presbyters or bishops to whom this office has been committed strengthen godly consciences by the gospel promises in the hope of pardon and forgiveness. This they do both publicly and privately. . . . [Forgiveness of sins] is dispensed to us through the ministers and pastors of the church, either by the preaching of the gospel or the administration of the sacraments; and herein chiefly stands out the power of the keys, which the Lord has conferred upon the society of believers (IV. i. 22; see also IV. xi. 1).

Of the second—what he calls elsewhere "public reconciliation" (IV. i. 22)—he says:

That no one may stubbornly despise the judgment of the church,

or think it immaterial that he has been condemned by the vote of the believers, the Lord testifies that such judgment by believers is nothing but the proclamation of his own sentence, and that whatever they have done on earth is ratified in heaven (IV. xi. 2).

From all that we have noted concerning the three forms of ecclesiastical power, it is clear that Calvin held a very high view of the place of the church in God's plan of edifying the saints and that he considered the place of the ministry in the exercise of this power to be an essential one.

3. The taking up of this ministry is a solemn thing, and no one may take it upon himself (IV. iii. 10).

(a) Thus there arises the concept of "calling", which Calvin speaks of as being two-fold. There is first "that secret call, of which each minister is conscious before God, and which does not have the church as witness" (IV. iii. 11). There is, secondly, the recognition by the church that each man has been endowed with such qualities as will enable him to exercise the office.

For, to be sure, learning joined with piety and the other gifts of the good pastor are a sort of preparation for it. Those whom the Lord has destined for such high office, he first supplies with the arms required to fulfil it, that they may not come empty-handed and unprepared (IV. iii. 11).

We must always see that they be adequate and fit to bear the burden imposed upon them, that is, that they be instructed in those skills necessary for the discharge of their office (IV. iii. 12).

The choice of ministers should not be made without the consent of the people.

We therefore hold that this call of a minister is lawful according to the Word of God, when those who seemed fit are created by the consent and approval of the people; moreover, that other pastors ought to preside over the election in order that the multitude may not go wrong either through fickleness, through evil intentions, or through disorder (IV. iii. 15).

(b) The importance of proper appointment is represented in the practice of the laying on of hands.

Although there exists no set precept for the laying on of hands, because we see it in continual use with the apostles, their very careful observance ought to serve in lieu of a precept. And surely it is useful for the dignity of the ministry to be commended to the people by this sort of sign, as also to warn the one ordained that he is no longer a law unto himself, but bound in servitude to God and the church. Moreover, it will be no empty sign if it is restored to its own true origin. For if the Spirit of God establishes nothing without cause in the church, we should feel that this ceremony, since it proceeded from him, is not useless, provided it be not turned to superstitious use. Finally, we must understand that the whole multitude did not lay hands upon its ministers, but the pastors alone did so (IV. iii. 16).

While clearly of the opinion that the laying on of hands should be

by a number, he speaks of its being "uncertain whether several always laid their hands on or not", and apparently understands the Pastoral Epistles as evidence that Paul acted alone when he created Timothy a presbyter (IV. iii. 16).

(c) The ministry being part of Christ's purpose to "fill all things", it is to be held in respect, even if particular ministers do not appear worthy of it.

Glorious titles [given in the Psalms to the Temple], they are used solely to bring esteem, love, reverence, and dignity to the ministry of the heavenly doctrine. Otherwise the appearance of a mortal and despised man would much detract from them. To make us aware, then, that an inestimable treasure is given us in earthen vessels, God himself appears in our midst, and, as Author of this order, would have men recognize him as present in his institution (IV. i. 5).

But when a puny man risen from the 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 (IV. iii. 1).

A sacrament must not be judged by the hand of the one by whom it is ministered but as if it were from the very hand of God (IV. xv. 16).

4. Pastors and teachers constitute the ordinary and permanent office of the ministry, and the church can never go without them (IV. iii. 4).

On the basis of Ephesians 4: 11 Calvin distinguished five sorts of offices "engaged in the ministry of the Word"<sup>7</sup> (IV. iii. 8): apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (IV. iii. 4). Although he discerned a sense in which pastors correspond to apostles and evangelists, and teachers to prophets (IV. iii. 5), he regarded all save pastors and teachers as extraordinary offices, raised up by the Lord at the beginning and revived by Him from time to time as the need demands (IV. iii. 4).

The distinction he drew between pastors and teachers was in these terms:

teachers are not put in charge of discipline, or administering the sacraments, or warnings and exhortations, but only of Scriptural interpretation—to keep doctrine whole and pure among believers (IV. iii. 4).

But his assertion that "the pastoral office includes all these functions within itself"<sup>8</sup> (IV. iii. 4), and his recognition that in Scrip-

<sup>7</sup> He notes that in Romans 12: 7-8 and 1 Corinthians 12: 28 Paul "lists others as powers, the gifts of healing, interpretation, government and caring for the poor". He regards two of these—government and caring for the poor—as permanent (IV. iii. 8).

<sup>8</sup> In point of fact there was little development anywhere of a separate office of teacher. Here Reformed practice seems to have anticipated modern exegesis, which tends to regard ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους as referring to one category.

ture the terms "bishop", "presbyter", "pastor" and "minister" are used interchangeably (IV. iii. 8), show that he thought of only one "order" in the ministry.

## II

Calvin was no mean patristic scholar. While, as the editor of the most recent edition of the *Institutes* concedes, "we still lack a full examination of his historical reading",<sup>9</sup> we know enough about it to be considerably impressed. The young and relatively unknown man who entered into the disputation with the Romanists at Lausanne in October, 1536, with the wry remark that the people who revered the Fathers might deign to occupy their time in reading them quickly showed himself in his following remarks to be quite capable of citing them extemporaneously.<sup>10</sup> And during the years which followed he increased his familiarity with the early fathers—as the successive editions of the *Institutes*, with their added citations of early writers, show. He was not merely trying to make a point but was advancing an argument which weighed with him when, in his "Prefatory Address",<sup>11</sup> he wrote of those who persecuted the Evangelicals:

If the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the tide of victory—to put it very modestly—would turn to our side" (4).

The belief that the views he advanced were consonant with those of the early church is brought out clearly in Book IV, Chapter iv: "The Condition of the Ancient Church, and the Kind of Government in Use Before the Papacy", which has as its opening words:

Up to this point we have discussed the order of church government as it has been handed down to us from God's pure Word, and also those ministries established by Christ. Now to make all these matters clearer and more familiar, and also to fix them better in our minds, it will be useful to recognize in those characteristics of the ancient church the form which will represent to our eyes some image of the divine institution. For even though the bishops of those times promulgated many canons, by which they seemed to express more than was expressed in Scripture, still they conformed their establishment with such care to the unique pattern of God's Word that you may readily see that it had almost nothing in this respect alien to God's Word (IV. iv. 1).

We shall now see how Calvin envisaged early church order in regard to the ministry, taking up certain matters in an order very

<sup>9</sup> John T. McNeill. *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XXI, p. 1,068.

<sup>10</sup> "Two Discourses on the Articles." *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XXII, pp. 38-45.

<sup>11</sup> "The Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France" was published with the first edition of the *Institutes* at Basel in 1536, when Calvin, greatly perturbed at his policy of persecuting Protestants, decided to present the book to Francis as a confession of faith.

close to that in which, in Part I, we set out what Calvin drew from the Scriptures concerning the nature of the ministry.

1. "Both bishops and presbyters had to devote themselves to the dispensing of Word and Sacraments." In the early years—and indeed as late as the time of Gregory ("when the church had well-nigh collapsed—surely it had deteriorated much from its ancient purity")—the idea of a bishop who did not preach was not tolerated. "It was a principle of long standing in the church that the primary duties of a bishop were to feed his people with the Word of God, or to build up the church publicly and privately with sound doctrine" (IV. iv. 3).

2. While it is difficult to find in Calvin's *Institutes* any place where he indicates in detail what he considered to have been the forms of government in the early church, certain references make it clear that he considered the primitive church to have been organized along the lines which, we have seen, he regarded as laid down in the Scriptures: that is to say, along the lines now generally regarded as characteristic of "Reformed" or "Presbyterian" churches.

Thus, for instance, the responsibility for the administration of Word and Sacraments rested initially with the presbyters. Bishops arose, he says, because the presbyters of each city chose one of their number, not to be higher in honour and dignity than his colleagues, but to carry out "the same functions as the consul has in the senate—to report on business, to request opinions, to preside over others in counselling, admonishing, and exhorting, to govern the whole action by his authority, and to carry out what was decreed by common decision". This "was introduced by human agreement to meet the needs of the time" (IV. iv. 2). A similar recognition of a practical need caused the emergence of arch-bishops and patriarchs (IV. iv. 4).

What he says under this head does not refer only to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments; Calvin envisaged all the aspects of ecclesiastical power — doctrinal, legislative and jurisdictional—to have been exercised in this corporate manner: with the voices of elders and deacons, and of the people at large, added to those of the bishops in appropriate instances (IV. xi. 6).

3. In choosing ministers, the early church followed the example set by the apostles who, "with the highest reverence and with earnest calling upon God's name", met to choose pastors, and then presented their choice for the approval of the people (IV. iv. 10). With the passing of time, the whole matter came to be left to the bishops and presbyters, though it was much longer

before the people's approval was displaced in the appointment of bishops (IV. iv. 11).

The ceremony by which, after election, the ministers were admitted to office is said by Calvin to be called "ordination" or "consecration" or "laying on of hands" (IV. iv. 14). Bishops were ordained by other bishops, and presbyters and deacons by the bishop acting in common with his college of presbyters, the ordination being called the bishop's because "he presided and things were done under his auspices" (IV. iv. 15).

4. What has already been said concerning the emergence of bishops and their duties will have shown that Calvin considered bishops to be of one order with presbyters. He did however discern certain other distinctions of order in the early church.

Whatever ministers the ancient church had it divided into three orders. For from the order of presbyters (1) part were chosen pastors and teachers; (2) the remaining part were charged with the censure and correction of morals; (3) the care of the poor and the distribution of alms were committed to the deacons (IV. iv. 1).

These three—the pastors and teachers (among whom he numbered the bishops), the presbyters charged with jurisdictional authority who did not labour in the Word (whom he sometimes refers to as "elders"), and the deacons—are what Calvin has in mind when he speaks of the "ministries of the ancient church". That there were others—doorkeepers, acolytes and so on—mentioned by the fathers he readily recognizes, but considers that these ministries "were more exercises and preparations than a distinct function" (IV. iv. 9).

Calvin was not blind to the value of succession as a warranty of sound doctrine and order: he was aware of "how much Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Augustine and others made of this succession" (IV. ii. 2), and he was acutely conscious of the seemingly similar claims by which the Romanists of his own day asserted that the true church was confined to them. What he could not accept was the notion that episcopal succession could of itself guarantee the soundness of the church—and he could not imagine that the early fathers had meant any such thing.

Nothing was farther from the minds of the holy doctors (whom they falsely thrust upon us) than to prove absolutely, as if by right of inheritance, that the church exists wherever bishops succeed one another. But while it was uncontroverted that no change of doctrine had occurred from the beginning to that age, they adopted this principle as sufficient to guard against all new errors; that is, they opposed them with the teaching firmly and with unanimous agreement maintained since the time of the apostles (IV. ii. 3).

These arrangements, which Calvin's reading told him were the ones prevailing in the early church, he clearly approved; and it

was the particular perversion of the papacy that it had brought about their overthrow, and had substituted an order in which the people were deprived of their rights and unsuitable men (unsuitable when judged by ancient canons, as well as when judged by Scripture) admitted to office in the church—without a proper examination, without consent of the people (IV. v. 2), without regard for the possibility of their fulfilling the duties of their office—even if they held only one. The tyranny of the papacy is a recurrent theme of Book IV (especially Chapters v, vi and vii), and is in itself a reminder of the way in which Calvin strove to show how widely the medieval church had strayed from its origins.

*(To be concluded)*

*Artarmon, N.S.W.*