

# Calvyn se leer oor die kerk<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

### Calvin's doctrine concerning the church

*A few aspects of Calvin's teachings on the church are pointed out to encourage the two churches involved in the Hervormde Theological Training to reconsider what Calvin himself has to say. This should not be done only in the light of his role in the past, but also within the context of the tremendous challenges and responsibilities that these two churches will have to face in the next millennium. Calvin's doctrine on the church can still provide instruction and guidance to the church today.*

## 1. INLEIDING

Beide die vakke kerkgeskiedenis en kerkreg, waarvoor ek die afgelope byna 20 jaar verantwoordelik was, veronderstel 'n bepaalde kerkbegrip. Die kerkbegrip is immers aanduidend vir die inhoud en omvang van die studieveld en bepalend vir die begrip en interpretasie van die *geskiedenis* en die *reg* wat ter sprake is. Vandag wil ek by hierdie geleentheid, wat so min of meer 'n soort afskeidsrede is aan die einde van my *amptelike* doseeropdrag, 'n paar opmerkings maak oor enkele aspekte van die groot Kerkhervormer Johannes Calvyn se leer oor die kerk.

Gekonfronteer met allerlei kerkbegrippe van buite, maar ook moontlike verskille oor die siening van die kerk binne eie geledere, is dit vir beide die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk en die Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika nodig om opnuut oor die saak te besin. Vir beide kerke is dit, ook veral met die oog op die sending, van belang om

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1. Rede gehou tydens die promosieplegtigheid van die Hervormde Teologiese Opleiding op Vrydag 5 November 1999. Vanweë die tweetaligheid van die gehoor, is die grootste gedeelte van hierdie artikel in Engels geskryf.

opnuut rekenskap te gee daarvoor of die Bybels-Reformatoriese teologie steeds relevant is en of die bepaalde teologiese tradisie binne die twee kerke steeds reg verstaan en uitgeleef word. Dit is immers ook 'n belangrike uitgangspunt van hierdie teologie dat 'n Hervormde kerk hom altyd weer opnuut hervorm na die eise van die Heilige Skrif.

Hoewel daar hoegenaamd geen twyfel kan bestaan dat die Heilige Skrif binne die twee kerke as normatiewe bron vir die besinning sal geld nie, darf dit nie vergeet word dat dit nie die eerste keer is dat oor die saak nagedink sal word nie. Trouens, die twee kerke het gemeenskaplike belydenisskrifte waarin nie net iets oor die Heer van die kerk nie maar ook oor die kerk van die Heer, bely word. En waar juis die kerkbeskouing van Calvyn in hierdie belydenisskrifte die rigtinggewende en deurslaggewende is, is dit feitlik vanselfsprekend dat na die denke van Calvyn self teruggevra sal word. In hierdie verband is dit belangrik om na die verwyte bevindinge van drie navorsers te verwys.

In die voorwoord van sy proefskrif, *Calvin's doctrine of the church (1970)*, skryf Benjamin Charles Milner jr dat dit in die eerste plek ekumeniese oorwegings was wat hom die keuse laat maak het om Calvin se ekklesiologie as fondament van die gereformeerde tradisie na tevors. As verdere rede voer hy aan:

Further impetus was added by the apparent lag between Calvin's high regard for the church and the lack of concern for it among his descendants, an indifference which – or so it seemed to me – was surely related to the church's tendency to define itself in terms of new construction, membership drives, programs, budgets and the like. I felt the absence of a theological understanding of the church in a most intense way, and so turned to Calvin for instruction and guidance.

(Milner 1970:preface)

Bouke Spoelstra het reeds in 1980 beweer dat selfs sogenaamde Calvinistiese kerkgemeenskappe in Suid-Afrika se basiese kerkbegrip min van die invloed van Calvyn verraai. Hoewel dit dalk te sterk gestel is, noodsaak dit juis dat weer noukeurig na Calvyn self geluister sal word. Hierby kan gevoeg word die klag van Bouwsma dat, alhoewel die Calvinisme geprys of verwyte word vir baie wat in die moderne wêreld

gedink word, "Calvin himself is now one of the least known among the great figures of his century" (Bouwsma 1988:1).

Die vraag kan natuurlik gestel word of Calvyn se denke van meer as vier eeue gelede steeds van soveel betekenis is vir vandag met die oog op hoe die kerk die toekoms tegemoet moet gaan, dat dit 'n saak is wat die aandag van die twee kerke by die wisseling van die eeu en meer nog, die wisseling van 'n millennium, in beslag moet neem. Twee aanhalings uit die voorwoord van Alister E McGrath se *A life of John Calvin* (1996b), waarin hy motivering bied vir sy keuse om sy hand aan 'n verdere algemene oorsig oor die lewe en tyd van Calvyn te waag, gee hierop wel 'n antwoord: "The religious, social, economic and cultural issues which focus upon this remarkable individual remain both profound and inexhaustible". Hy sê verder:

It is no longer appropriate to think of history as the "biographies of great men". Nevertheless certain individuals – such as Calvin ... – do appear to have exercised sufficient influence over the historical proces to lend a certain credibility to the notion. The ideas, outlook and structures developed by Calvin proved capable of generating and sustaining a movement which transcended the limitations of his historical location and personal characteristics.

Ek deel nie die byna histeriese millenniumkoors wat tans in die wêreld vaardig is nie, maar ek meen wel dat dit verantwoord is vir die twee kerke wat by die Hervormde Teologiese Opleiding betrokke is, om voortdurend in elke tyd opnuut rekenskap te gee oor dit wat die kerk in elke tydsbedeling behoort te doen. Dit is seker so dat elke nuwe tyd vir die kerk sy gevare maar ook sy uitdagings inhou en daarom is dit lewensnoodsaaklik dat elke kerk voortdurend na die basiese vraag sal terugkeer om verantwoording te doen oor dit wat die kerk is en wat die kerk se roeping en taak in elke tyd is. Juis in dié verband is die kerkgeskiedenis en die bestudering van die kerkgeskiedenis van baie groot waarde. Immers, as die Skrif leer dat "... die gebeurtenisse van gister die verantwoordelikheid van vandag swaarder maak ten opsigte van die dag van môre ..." (Pont 1983:Inleiding), dan moet by elke besinning in die hede met die oog op die toekoms teruggevra word na dit wat die verlede in die verband leer. Hoewel byna vyf eeue in die

verlede, kan Calvyn se denke in die algemeen, maar veral ook sy denke oor die kerk, soos Milner dit stel, "instruction en guidance" bied en kan dit alleen skadelik en nadelig wees indien nie daarvan kennis geneem word nie.

Uiteraard is dit nie moontlik om by hierdie geleentheid breedvoerig en volledig op Calvyn se leer aangaande die kerk in te gaan nie. Waar dit die opdrag van die historikus is om die gesprek tussen die verlede en die hede te bemiddel, sien ek dit as my verantwoordelikheid om by hierdie geleentheid, deur slegs enkele aspekte van Calvyn se denke oor die kerk aan te stip, die twee kerke wat ek die voorreg gehad het om te kon dien, daartoe op te roep om opnuut en ook noukeurig te luister na dit wat Calvyn self werklik oor die kerk gesê het om dit dan te weeg met die oog op die geweldige verantwoordelikheid, veral ook ten opsigte van die kerk se apostolêre taak, wat op die twee kerke in hierdie land in die komende tye sal rus.

## **2. CALVIN'S ECCLESIOLOGY**

Calvin's ecclesiology was central to his theological reflections. This statement may be amplified with reference to the findings of three investigators:

Milner, who researched Calvin's ecclesiology in most of his writings, is convinced that the total structure of Calvin's theology can be fully comprehended only if his ecclesiology is understood. He puts it in this way: "In the course of my investigations, however, I became increasingly aware that in working with Calvin's doctrine of the church I was not laboring with an isolated aspect of his theology, but was, in fact, being led straight into the centre of his thought.

(Milner 1970: preface)

W H van der Vegt concludes:

Thus he [Calvin] is a man of the Church. His title of honour is son of the Church. His God is the God of the Church. To him the children of God are

citizens of the Church. The Word of God he calls Word of the Church.  
Preaching is the preaching of the Church.

(Dauma & Van der Vegt s a:5; own translation)

Willem van 't Spijker calls Calvin, along with Bucer, a theologian of the church and of the Holy Spirit (Van 't Spijker 1994:33). According to Alister E McGrath (1996a:412) it was only after the Colloquy of Regensburg (or Ratisbon) of 1541 had collapsed that a real need arose for Protestant writers to develop theories of the church. Before that date, there was still a strong sense amongst the first generation reformers that the withdrawal from the Roman Catholic Church was only temporarily. The situation faced by the second generation reformers had changed considerably. McGrath (1996a: 412) states: "The second generation of reformers, amongst whom Calvin stands out as supreme, were faced with the challenge of developing a coherent and systematic ecclesiology, on the basis of the realization that separation from the main body of the Catholic church would continue indefinitely."

If one inquires into Calvin's doctrine of the church, it is essential to look for it not only in Book IV of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or even in the *Institutes* as a whole, but also in various treatises and, above all, in Calvin's commentaries on Scripture. The main reason for consulting the commentaries, according to Milner (1970), is that Calvin's more mature reflections can be found in his commentaries. To this one can also add many of his sermons, particularly his sermons based on the letter to the Ephesians.

## **2.1 The church is God's creation**

The church *is* because God has acted. God is therefore the active subject, and in any discussion on the church this must be taken into account. For Calvin, it was a firm point of departure that the church exists, that the church continues to exist, that the church has a future towards which it is *en route*, exclusively owing to the fact that God has acted, is acting at this moment and will continue to act. Whatever may be said about the church, whatever metaphor may be used, it must always be remembered that the church is God's creation and therefore his property, something he is intimately involved with. For Calvin,

the church was a living, pneumatic and dynamic organism because of God's continuing active presence. Milner points out that when one is studying Calvin's doctrine of the church, one is clearly struck by his repeated use of metaphors that compare the church to an organism and, more specifically, to the human organism. Therefore Milner concludes:

Aside from those well-known and important metaphors which refer to the organic connection between the church and its members [*for instance the church as the body of Christ and as the mother of all the faithful* – S J B], there is a series of figures in which the church itself is depicted as a historically developing organism: it is *conceived* and *born*, grows from *infancy* and *youth* to *manhood*, appears to die, but is in fact *wonderfully preserved* and rises again to newness of life.

(Milner 1970:7)

Futhermore, the church is not a creation of God dating only from the coming of Jesus Christ. For Calvin the beginning of the Church lies much further back in the past than the Pentecost, for instance. He even refers to Adam and Eve as members of the church. An example of this is his commentary on Genesis 4:25:

Adam and Eve, with a few other of their children, were themselves true worshippers of God ... We might rightly conclude that Seth was an upright and faithful servant of God. And after he begot a son, like himself, and had a rightly constituted family, the face of the church begin distinctly to appear, and that worship of God was set up which might continue to posterity.

(Calvin 1949:222)

In the words of the Confessio Belgica (Article 27), this notion is also confessed by the followers of Calvin: "This church has been from the beginning of the world and will be to its end." According to Calvin, God established order in all aspects of creation. The fall, which was nothing other than pride and disobedience, but which finds its deepest

root in infidelity, perverted the total order of creation and alienated man from God. Then God created the church to restore order in the creation. It is clear that, for Calvin, the church is intimately linked with the restoration of the fallen world. For this reason, Calvin sees the church as a living, dynamic organism, created by God to restore order in creation and to live to the glory of God (Milner 1970:47).

Whenever Calvin writes about the fall, therefore, he refers to the Church as God's creation. From his commentary on Genesis 15:10, it is clear that Calvin regards the creation of the church, which is also a *creatio ex nihilo*, as a raising from the death and the grave (Milner 1970:47). Within the distorted post-lapsarian creation, which means nothing but death, God is at work, constantly gathering together those who belong to his church. Milner concludes that for Calvin the church "is not so much an institution in history in which the restoration of order has been accomplished, as it is itself the history of that restoration" (Milner 1970:47).

When Calvin uses the metaphor "mother of all the faithful" for the church, it really becomes clear how highly he speaks of the church. In the *Institutes* he puts it this way:

Let us learn even from this simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keeps us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives.

(Calvin, *Institutes* IV.1.4)

What Calvin does here is to confirm the two great ecclesiological maxims of Cyprian: "You cannot have God as your father unless you have the church for your mother" and "Outside the church there is no hope of remission of sins nor any salvation" (McGrath 1996a:414). This leads Hesselink (1997:155) to say: "Here Calvin sounds more like a Roman Catholic than a Protestant."

## 2.2 The church: visible and invisible

This confirmation of Cyprian by Calvin must be seen against the background of the distinction between the visible and invisible church. The church as a community of Christian believers is a visible group, but, at the same time, the church is the fellowship of the saints and the company of the elect – an invisible entity. McGrath (1996a:413) summarises it in this way:

In its invisible aspect, the church is the invisible assembly of the elect, known only to God; in its visible aspect, it is the community of believers on earth. The former consists only of the elect; the latter includes both good and evil, elect and reprobate. The former is an object of faith and hope, the latter of present experience. The distinction between them is eschatological: The invisible church is the church which will come into being at the end of time, as God ushers in the final judgement of humanity

This distinction does not mean that Calvin regarded the visible church as something secondary at all or that he had a concept of the invisible church as a sort of Platonic ideal. Although there may be and is indeed much about the visible church that causes shame and embarrassment, it does not justify anyone's taking refuge in some ideal invisible church. "Calvin stresses that all believers are obliged to honour and to remain committed to the visible church, despite its weaknesses, on account of the invisible church, the true body of Christ. Despite this, there is only one church, a single entity with Jesus Christ as its head" (McGrath 1996a:413).

For Calvin, the distinction between a visible and invisible church has two consequences:

- The visible church is a *corpus permixtum*. Here Calvin follows Augustine.
- It is necessary to ask which of the various visible churches corresponds to the invisible church. Calvin articulates two objective criteria according to which the authenticity of a given church may be judged: "Wherever we see the Word of God preached purely and listened to, and the sacraments administered according



to the institution of Christ, we cannot doubt that a church exists” (McGrath 1996a:414). Calvin also explains this idea in this way: “As it is necessary, therefore, to believe that church, which is invisible to us, and conspicuous to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to honour and maintain communion with that which is called church with respect to man” (Calvin Inst IV.1.7).

Maybe one can conclude on this aspect of Calvin’s ecclesiology that the church as mother of the faithful, although invisible, can only be found in the clothing of the visible church.

### **2.3 The church as Kingdom and Body of Christ**

It is not possible to discuss fully Calvin’s application of these two metaphors, but, according to Milner (1970:164), Calvin’s deepest and most concrete understanding of the church can be found in his conception of the Kingdom and Body of Christ. Calvin uses these two metaphors very consistently and frequently. Although both figures are biblical and traditional, Calvin’s use of them is distinctive because he anchors them in the offices of Christ as king and priest. In his Commentary on Jeremiah 33:17-18, Calvin even calls them the marks of a true church:

These are the marks of a true church ... For where the kingdom and priesthood of Christ (*regnum et sacerdotium Christi*) are found, there certainly is the church; but where Christ is not owned as a king and a priest there is nothing but chaos, as under the papacy; ... as they do not submit to his government and laws, nor are satisfied with his priesthood, but have devised for themselves numberless patrons. ... Let us then learn to begin with the kingdom and priesthood when we speak of the state and the government of the church.

Milner’s (1970:165) comment on this is worth noting:

The kingly and priestly offices of Christ correspond then to the sanctification (regeneration) and justification (reconciliation, forgiveness) of man; for Calvin, one might say, Christ died for our justification and rose for our sancti-

fication. It is necessary to add, however, that the saving work of Christ is made efficacious in us only through the work of the Holy Spirit; only through him are the kingly and priestly offices made into our sanctification and justification.

Two further quotes from Calvin's commentaries speak for themselves: "We have, by entering through faith into the kingdom of Christ, passed from death to life, ... Christ himself, into whose body we are engrafted, quickens us by his power, and the Spirit that dwells in us is life" (Calvin, Comm 1 Th 5:10) and "Salvation comes to us by faith for this reason, because it joins us to God, and this comes not in any other way than by being united to the body of Christ, so that living through his Spirit, we are also governed by him" (Calvin, Comm James 2:14). This leads Milner to the conclusion that "each of these metaphors embraces within itself Calvin's dialectical understanding of the church, but that is only because neither can stand independently of the other. Calvin's doctrine of the church, then, is most fully expressed in the dialectic of these two concepts, grounded as they are in the correlation of the twofold work of the Holy Spirit" (Milner 1970:188/9).

#### **2.4 Unity of the church and the truth**

There is no doubt that Calvin took to heart the Scriptural call to unity. In this regard, Balke (1992:131) concludes: "The unity of the church has the heart of Calvin."

From the above discussion of Calvin's doctrine on the church, it follows logically that the church is by nature a unity. Christ, per definition, only has one body and he alone is head and king of the church. This does not, mean however, that Calvin was thinking of an unconditional unity to be maintained at all costs. He was not a theologian of compromises and he saw no solution whatever in relativism. For this reason, Calvin was not a proponent of a unity that overrides credal divisions (Balke 1992). There can only be unity between people, including believers, if that unity is grounded in an attachment to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the unity of the church flows from being attached to God and Jesus Christ and therefore Calvin can reject the idea that Christ needs a church organisation or institute to keep unity in the church. Bouwsma concludes that for Calvin the thought of institutional unity was futile for two reasons. First, it was not

attainable in the context of the prevailing political realities, and furthermore, it was not necessarily desirable in the light of the consequences of papal tyranny (Bouwsma 1988: 215). Thus structural or organisational unity under one head, like Rome, does not constitute the “true” unity of the church and could even be misused.

For Calvin the unity of the church is not something that can be achieved by the faithful. It is something that is given by God, that is achieved by his Spirit. Being united with God means being united with one’s fellow-believers. And if anyone denies or denigrates unity with fellow-believers, that person’s union with God is at risk. However, the gift of unity brings with it a duty, a calling and a responsibility. It is not up to believers to accomplish unity with God or one another. It is something which is given, because God has already accomplished it. What is required of the believers, on the one hand, is to be conscious of the danger of damaging unity by the weaknesses and sin that result from and cause discord and strife. On the other hand, believers are called upon to persevere in the common faith, unity and obedience in serving God and to perform self-denying service for one another.

### **3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CALVIN’S DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH**

Milner (1970:194) concludes that the special significance of Calvin’s doctrine of the church is that it requires one to think of it as the history of the restoration of order in the world. This has three definite implications:

- The church is an historical movement, always *en route*, a pilgrim, never at rest, an organism – precisely analogous of Calvin’s understanding of Christian life as one of perpetual repentance, that is, *regeneration*.
- It is not so much doctrine, creed, tradition, ritual practice or polity which define the church, but ethics, that is, *sanctification*.
- It means that the church cannot be thought of as being apart from the world, or as a secure corner of redemption in it.

#### 4. TEN SLOTTE

Aan ander belangrike aspekte van Calvyn se denke oor die kerk, soos byvoorbeeld dat die kerk in volkskerklike gestalte onder die verskillende volke verskyn en die kerkordelike vorm wat uit sy bepaalde kerkbegrip voortvloei, word by hierdie geleentheid nie aandag gegee nie, omdat dit reeds elders aan die orde gestel is. Daarom volstaan ek deur vandag slegs die derde implikasie te beklemtoon. Aldrie die implikasies, maar in besonder die derde, roep sowel die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk as die Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika tot aksie. Nie een van die twee kerke durf, om watter rede ook al, die houding inslaan van “Ek is gelukkig met my boekie in my hoekie” nie. Daarom is dit voortdurend nodig dat weer en weer besin sal word oor wat dit beteken om kerk te wees in ’n land en in ’n wêreld waarin die kerk al meer uitgerangeer word. Maar dan moet nie net by die besinning gebly word nie, maar daar moet ook tot die daad gekom word.

Vanselfsprekend moet hierdie besinning in die eerste plek geskied vanuit die normerende bron van die Heilige Skrif; ondergeskik daaraan het die genormeerde bron van die belydenisskrifte ’n onmisbare plek; en derdens is dit ook van groot belang om die denke oor die kerk in die verlede, selfs die nabye en selfdeurleefde verlede, ter sprake te bring. Ek hoop dat ek met die paar opmerkings oor enkele aspekte van Calvyn se leer oor die kerk, aangetoon het dat veral ook sy denke opnuut noukeurig aan die orde moet kom.

Teenoor die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk het ek as lidmaat en predikant die vrymoedigheid om die oproep te doen. Ek meen dat die besinning wel op ’n wye front in die Hervormde Kerk aan die gang gekom het met die besinning oor en die aanvaarding van die Kerkorde in 1997. Dit kan daarby nie eindig nie, want wat tot dusver in die Kerkorde neerslag gevind het, moet ook in dae omgesit word. Daar mag nie vergeet word dat die kerk ’n lewende en dinamiese organisme moet bly nie.

Vanweë my jarelange betrokkenheid by die sending (sedert 1963), en dus by die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika, veral sedert 1980 as dosent, meen ek dat ek ook die vrymoedigheid mag neem om dieselfde dringende oproep tot die Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika te maak. Teyvore het ek reeds die suggestie gelaat dat die HKSA self nou die opstel van ’n kerkorde ter hand behoort te neem. Omdat ek daarvan oortuig is dat dit in die beste belang van die HKSA is, herhaal ek my suggestie

en dring ek selfs aan dat die taak wel ter hand geneem sal word. Om dit na behore te doen, sal u ook noukeurig na Calvyn se leer oor die kerk self moet luister.

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