Protestantism and Conciliarity

Emidio Campi*

The assigned topic –"Protestantism and Conciliarity"– is very wide. Looking for a peg on which to hang my presentation, I have preferred to focus on "Calvin and Conciliarity". There are a number of reasons why Calvin, rather than Luther, Melanchthon, Bullinger or others, has been chosen. In the space available for such a presentation, it is impossible to deal in some depth with more than one reformer. Moreover, being Waldensian by birth and conviction Calvinism has had the greatest theological influence on my life and thought. But above all, because Calvin's thinking about the nature of Christian community, his willingness to mediate controversial matters in the midst of division, and his tireless efforts to build bridges at every level of church life, stand as a contemporary challenge. During the 1960s and 1970s, when renewal and reunion were high on the ecumenical agenda, many fine studies paid attention to this aspect of his activity; whereas conversely, the general lessening of interest in the institutional ecumenical movement during the 1990s and beyond seems to have hampered research on this topic.[1] Thus it might be of some use to propose a *re-lecture* of

---

* Emidio Campi, professeur émérite à l'Université de Zurich.

1. For a selection of the older literature see: WILLEM N. NIJENHUIS, *Calvinus Oecumenicus. Calvijn en de eenheid der kerk in het licht van zijn briefwisseling. With a summary: Calvinus Oecumenicus. Calvin and the Unity of the Church as viewed from his Correspondence's*-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958); WILLEM N. NIJENHUIS, "Church Unity in Luther and Calvin", in *Ecclesia Reformata. Studies on the Reformation II* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 24-47; GOTTFRIED W. LOCHER, *Calvin. Anwalt der Ökumene* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1960); ALEXANDRE GANOCZY, *Calvin théologien de l'Eglise et du ministère* (Paris: Les Ed. du Cerf, 1964); OTTO WEBER, "Die Einheit der Kirche" (1960), in OTTO WEBER, *Die Treue Gottes in der Geschichte der Kirche. Gesammelte Aufsätze II* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968), 105-118; JOHN T. MCNEILL, "Calvin as an Ecumenical Churchman", *Church History*. 32 (1963), 379-391. RICHARD STAUFFER, "Calvin, pionnier de l'unité chrétienne", *La revue réformée*, 81 (1970), 1-17. For recent contributions see RICHARD STAUFFER, *The quest for church unity : from John Calvin to Isaac d'Huisseau* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1986); JOHN I. HESSELINK, "Calvinus Oecumenicus: Calvin's vision of the unity and catholicity of the Church", *Reformed Re*-

117

Calvin's approach to the widespread question of unity of the church and in particular to the question of conciliarity, as factor of unity but also of communion between the churches.

The aim of the essay is twofold. First, I will present Calvin's passionate and consistent commitment to the unity of the body of Christ within the reality of an already fragmented church. Second, I will discuss briefly the concept of conciliarity providing some examples of conciliar fellowship *in via*.

1. Calvin 's commitment to the unity of the church.

Before turning to Calvin's efforts to understand the causes of separation and, in accordance with Scripture, to strive toward visible unity among the churches, let me briefly mention some general aspects of Calvin's ecclesiology that are directly relevant to our theme.

1.1 *Ecclesiological principles*

Like the other Reformers, both Lutheran and Reformed, Calvin had a vivid awareness of the twofold character of the church as the invisible or holy and spiritual society of the truly faithful, and the visible or earthly and imperfect association of professing Christians.[2] The distinction depended ultimately on Au-

---

view, 44 (1990), 92-122; Klauspeter Blaser, "Calvin's vision of the church", *Ecumenical Review* 45 (1993), 316-327; ANETTE ZILLENBILLER, *Die Einheit der katholischen Kirche. Calvins Cyprianrezeption in seinen ekklesiologischen Schriften* (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1993); LUKAS VISCHER, *Pia conspiratio. Calvin on the unity of Christ's Church* (Geneva: John Knox Centre, 2000); ALASDAIR I. C. HERON, "The relevance of the early Reformed tradition, particularly of Calvin, for a ecumenical ecclesiology today", in LUKAS VISCHER (ed.) , *The Church in Reformed Perspective: A European Reflection.* (Geneva: John Knox Centre, 2002), 47-74; RANDALL C. ZACHMAN (ed.), *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism: critique and engagement, then and now* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008); EVA-MARIA FABER, "Calvinus catholicus. Zur Calvin-Rezeption in der römisch-katholischen Kirche und Theologie am Beispiel von Pneumatologie, Ekklesiologie und Ämterlehre", in MARCO HOFHEINZ ET AL. (ed.), *Beiträge zur Wirkungsgeschichte Johannes Calvins* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 45-75.

2. For Calvin's ecclesiology, see FRANçOIS WENDEL, *Calvin. Sources et évolution de sa pensé religieuse* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1985²), 221-237; BENJAMIN CHARLES MILNER JR., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden : Brill, 1970); HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS; "Church on Stage: Calvin Dynamic Ecclesiology", in DAVID FOXGROVER(ed.), *Calvin and the Church: papers presented at the 13th Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society, May 24-26, 2001* (Grand Rapids,

gustine and meant that the invisible church is seen by God alone; the visible is open to our discernment. Yet making the distinction too sharply would drive a wedge between the two, and Calvin could not accept this result. There are not two churches, one invisible and the other visible, but rather one church simultaneously invisible and visible, divine and human. The invisible church is manifested on earth through a visible church which, though imperfect, shows signs of the invisible church. Calvin emphatically insisted that the two aspects must remain wholly distinct and never be confused, and yet, at the same time, that the distinction does not entail separation. Hence, in the *Institutes – Book IV*, Calvin introduces his doctrine of the church by discussing briefly her election and calling by God. Only God knows those who are his own; it is his secret election which is the foundation of the church.[3] He then gives the great majority of his attention to the visible church. However, although he was chiefly concerned with the external manifestation, it is noteworthy that Calvin saw the church not so much as an institution or as the result of human initiative. He called the church "the external means or aids by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein", which is the title of *Book IV*.

In order to emphasize this conviction, he frequently used the metaphors 'mother' and 'school' to describe the church.[4] As "mother of the believers" and "God's school," the church fulfils an indispensable function in the economy of redemption. While the incarnation of Christ forms the primary and unique medium through which God accommodates himself to us,[5] the church is a sub-

---

Mich.: CRC Product Services, 2002),46-64; GENE HAAS, "Calvin, the Church and Ethics", in *ibidem*, 72-91; Georg Plasger, "Ecclesiology" in HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS (ed.), *The Calvin Handbook*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2009), 323-331.

3. *Inst.* 4.1.2.

4. See *Com. 1. Tim.* 3:15, *CO* 52, 288. The church is the mother of all believers "because she brings them the new birth by the Word of God, educates and nourishes them all their life, strengthens them and finally leads them to complete perfection."; *Com. 1. Tim.*5:7, CO 52, 308. The church is "God's school", the "pillar and ground of the truth", because instructs "in the study of a holy and perfect life." *Com. 1. Tim.* 4:6, *CO* 52, 298; *Inst.* 4.1.4. See ALBRECHT THIEL, *In der Schule Gottes: die Ehik Calvins im Spiegel seiner Predigten über das Deuteronomium* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Nekirchener Verlag, 1999), 289-318; RAYMOND A. BLACKETER, *The School of God. Pedagogy and Rethorik in Calvin's Interpretation of Deuteronomy* (Dordrecht: Springer 2006), 40-42.

5. For the concept of "accomodation" in Calvin's thought see JOHN BALSERAK, *Divinity Compromised. A Study of Divine Accomodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht:

ordinate or external means that God also uses to approach and make himself accessible to us. And while Calvin leaves God the freedom to communicate his grace otherwise than through the church,[6] the church ordinarily serves as the society within which faith is born, nourished, and strengthened. The specific manner in which this occurs is through the ministry of the Word and the sacraments.[7] The other recurring and even more poignant metaphor in Calvin's ecclesiology is the Pauline description of the church as the "body of Christ." The church is, in her most fundamental nature, the body of Christ, who is her divine head. Pre-eminently this means that regardless of organizational or institutional features, the church is firstly conceived as a living organism, as the fellowship of believers in which each is dependent on the help of others, and all grow more and more into one body, under one common head, Jesus Christ.[8] The bond between Christ as head and the church as his body guarantees the unity of the church as well as her preservation. Because Christ is living in his members, there is only one church that will last until the end of time.[9]

Thus we can already begin to see how closely this conception of the church, expressed through the metaphor of the loving mother who bears and nourishes her children, or the image of the living organism centred on Christ, is connected with the question of unity. If the church is the external means by which Christ continues his saving ministry, then unity is an indispensible requirement for the *esse*, the very being of the church. Calvin stressed this point time and again in his early writings, in various treatises, or in sermons, letters, and commentaries on Scripture, and above all in the *Institutes* of 1559.[10] In the 1536 edition of the

---

Springer, 2006); ARNOLD HUIJGEN, *Divine Accomodotation in John Calvin's Theology. Analysis and Assesment* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

    6. *Inst.* 4.1.5.

    7. *Inst.* 4.1.9. See CORNELIS P. VENEMA, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ. The "Twofold Grace of God" and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 208-228, here 209.

    8. *Inst.* 4.3.1.-2.

    9. *Ps 61:7, CO* 31, 583.

    10. The article by R.E. POT ,"Calvin and Ecumenicity. The Genevan Reformer's Attempts at Unification" (April 1997), in http://www.richardpot.net/papers/calvin.html is a very useful repository of quotations from Calvin's occasional writings, commentaries, sermons and letters. See also VISCHER, *Pia conspiratio,* 11-33.

Institutes, Calvin already showed an ardent desire for unity.[11] "Always, both by word and deed", he wrote in his *Reply to Sadolet*, "I have protested how eager I was for unity".[12] The theme was a permanent undertone in the commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. Commenting on 1 Cor 1:10, he affirmed that "nothing is more inconsistent on the part of Christians than to be at variance among themselves, for it is the main article of our religion that we be in harmony among ourselves; and furthermore, on such agreement the safety of the Church rests and is dependent."[13] The same desire for unity is apparent in Calvin's commentary on Ephesians 4:4-5,

> "One Divine invitation being addressed to all, they ought to be united in the same profession of faith, and to render every kind of assistance to each other. Oh, were this thought deeply impressed upon our minds, that we are subject to a law which no more permits the children of God to differ among themselves than the kingdom of heaven to be divided, how earnestly should we cultivate brotherly kindness! How should we dread every kind of animosity, if we duly reflected that all who separate us from brethren estrange us from the kingdom of God! .[...] Christ cannot be divided. Faith cannot be rent. There are not various baptisms, but one which is common to all. God cannot cease to be one, and unchangeable. It cannot but be our duty to cherish holy unity, which is bound by so many ties. Faith, and baptism, and God the Father, and Christ, ought to unite us, so as almost to become one human being."[14]

In the *Institutes* of 1559, alluding to the creedal confession of "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church," Calvin thought that our hopes for eternal life are directly related to our unity as the body of Christ, "For unless we are united with all the other members under Christ our head, no hope of the future in-

---

11. *CO 1, 72-73:* "Haec autem societas catholica est, id est, universalis, quia non duas aut tres invenire liceat, verum electi Dei sic omnes in Christo uniuntur ac coadunantur, ut, quemadmodum ab uno capite pendent, ita in unum velut corpus coalescant; ea inter se compositione cohaerentes, qua eiusdem corporis membra; vere unum facti, qui in una fide, spe, caritate, eodem Dei spiritu, simul vivunt, in eandem vitae aeternae haereditatem vocati (Rom. 12. 1 Cor. 10 et 12. Eph. 4)."

12. *CO 5*, 409: " Ego semper et verbis et factis testatus sum, quanto unitatis studio tenerer."

13. *Comm. I Cor. 1:10*, *CO* 49, 314. See EVA-MARIA FABER, "Gegenseitige Verbundenheit als Gabe und Aufgabe: zum Kirchenverständnis von Johannes Calvin", in MARTIN HIRZEL, MARTIN SALLMANN (eds.), *Johannes Calvin 1509-2009. Sein Wirken in Kirche und Gesellschaft. Essays zum 500. Geburtstag* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2008), 159-182

14. *Comm. Eph.* 4:4, *CO* 51, 190-191.

heritance awaits us. Hence the church is called catholic or universal (August. Ep. 48) for two or three cannot be invented without dividing Christ; and this is impossible" [*Inst.* 4.1.2]. Indeed, our creedal confession in the "communion of the saints" requires that we "maintain brotherly concord with all the children of God, give due authority to the church, and, in short, conduct ourselves as sheep of the flock" [*Inst.* 4.1.3]. Because God chooses to bring his people to maturity in Christ through "the education of the church," Calvin warned that "abandonment of the church is always fatal" [*Inst.* 4.1.4]. For the same reason, Calvin found "detestable" those "who delight in producing schisms in churches, just as if they wished to drive the sheep from the fold, and throw them into the jaws of wolves." Indeed, Calvin called such persons "apostates" [*Inst.* 4.1.5].

These few quotations that could be easily multiplied make clear how closely Calvin's doctrine of the church is connected to the question of unity. On the other hand, he did not hold that institutional unity belongs to the definition of the church in such a way as to be on an equal plane with the only "sacred bond of unity" which, for Calvin, was Christ. The visible church in this world is "a multitude gathered from all nations; it is divided and dispersed in separate places, but it agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine and is bound by the bond of the same religion" [*Inst.*4.1.9]. Neither a legally defined institution, such as for example the papacy [*Inst.* 4.6.1], nor the absolute holiness of her members, as the Anabaptists claimed, [*Inst.* 4.1.13] hold the church together. The key to the desired unity of the church is Christ; unity is grounded in spiritual union with Christ and his body. "Christ will not and cannot be torn from his Church with which he is joined in an indissoluble knot, as the head to the body. Hence unless we cultivate unity with the faithful, we see that we are cut off from Christ."[15]

Having broached the general nature of the church, Calvin proceeds with the distinction between the true and false church. In our ecumenical age, it is unfashionable to use such categories with respect to churches or denominational bodies. However, since the Reformer held that there was no salvation outside the church, it was a matter of the greatest moment for him to be able to recognize the true visible form of the church. By what, then, can the true church be discerned? It is well known that Calvin slightly modified the definition of the Augsburg Confession to give us the classical Reformed statement on the

---

15. *Comm. Ezek.* 13:9, *CO* 40, 372.

Church, "Wherever we see the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."[16] Noteworthy in this formula is the explicitness of language: the Word of God is not only "purely preached" but also "heard." Calvin's addition emphasizes the importance of people actually hearing what was preached and applying this to their lives both collectively and individually. It is also significant that Calvin did not, as did the Reformed tradition generally, follow Bucer and Oecolampadius in considering church discipline as *nota ecclesiae*, nor did he accept the Anabaptist view of the church imbued as it was with the conviction of the necessity of perfect sanctity. He was particularly clear on this matter. In a forceful passage, Calvin argued that to condemn wickedness in the church is one thing; to judge that no church exists on account of its lack of perfect purity of life is quite another. It is vain to expect the church on earth to be completely purified. Perfection of life is not itself a characteristic note of the church. The marks of the true church are the Word of God and the sacraments.[17] Of course, this was not meant to be a formal definition, but rather a way of discerning where a church is. There may be a lot of other aspects attached to the notion of church that are incidental to the fulfilment of its essential purpose, said Calvin, but as long as there is faithful preaching and hearing of the Word of God and a right administration of the sacraments, there is the church. Where these marks are found, one must never separate from the church, however marred it may be in other ways; and vice versa, wherever they are absent, there is no true church.

1.2. Calvin's Application of his ecclesiological principles

In the light of these ecclesiological principles, we are now able to approach Calvin's position in his actual dealings with the other Protestant churches of his day, and, indeed, even with the Church of Rome. Contrary to much popular thinking today, Calvin was not intolerant of those with whom he differed, as long as he felt that they did not disagree from pure wantonness or hatred of the biblical truth. Rather, he was always prepared to do his utmost to bring about uni-

---

16. *Inst.* 4.1.9. In the *Confessio Augustana*, art. 7, the church is defined as "congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta", in BSLK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, ⁶1967), 61.
17. *Inst.* 4.1. 13.

ty, and even when he was not successful, as long as there was an agreement on essentials he was prepared to recognize those differing from him as Christians.

After Luther's attacks upon Zwingli and his followers over the matter of the Lord's Supper, Calvin was concerned that disunity represented the biggest threat to the Reformation movement and concentrated himself on the task of building unity between the currents, notably the Zwinglians, the Lutherans, and the Anglicans. Revealing a flexibility not always conspicuous among his fellow Reformers, Calvin discussed the strife between Lutherans and Zwinglians over the Lord's Supper and was not afraid to criticize both with a striking independence. He sought a middle way between Luther's consubstantiation and Zwingli's symbolism; and to that end, he insisted on what he called the spiritual eating of the body of Christ. His major achievement in this field was the joint statement on the sacraments that he produced with Heinrich Bullinger in 1549, called since the nineteenth century *Consensus Tigurinus*.[18] The Zurich Agreement grew not only out of a desire to reach a union of the Swiss Reformed churches with Geneva, but nurtured the hope to heal the breach between the Reformed and Lutherans. Paradoxically, however, Lutheran theologians read the document as definitive abandonment of Luther's teaching of the Supper in favour of Zwinglianism. Emotional attacks of strict Lutherans like Joachim Westphal and Melanchthon's discomforting silence provoked brusque and eloquent responses from Calvin. The debates continued and grew in intensity, yet Calvin continued the dialogue, constantly affirming reconciliation. In the *Ultima Admonitio* (1557), he declared,

> "But as long as any hope of pacification appears, it will not be my fault if mutual good-will is not maintained. Though from being unworthily provoked I have been more vehement in this writing than I was inclined to be, still were a time and place appointed for friendly discussion, I declare and promise that I will be ready to attend, and manifest a spirit of leniency which will not retard the desired success of a pious and holy concord. I am not one who delights in intestine dissension."[19]

---

18. See EMIDIO CAMPI AND RUEDI REICH, *Consensus Tigurinus. Die Einigung zwischen Heinrich Bullinger und Johannes Calvin über das Abendmahl* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2009); see also FRANK EWERSZUMRODE, *Mysterium Christi spiritualis praesentiae. Die Abendmahlslehre des Genfer Reformators Johannes Calvin aus römisch-katholischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 105-137.

19. John Calvin, *Ultima admonitio ad Ioachimum Westphalum, CO* 9:137-252, here 250. See

Yet although desiring to make unity manifest, there does not seem to have been any idea that the two churches should become one in all ceremonies, nor that they should have a common government. It was a case of unity of spirit, rather than that of outward form.

He gave his support to the *Grand Dessein* of the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, in 1551 that a general council of all Protestants be held in order to agree a common doctrinal statement . Although Cranmer with the help of Peter Martyr Vermigli laid some of the groundwork for this, the death of Edward VI in 1553 and the accession of Bloody Mary put an end to his ambitious plan. Calvin wrote to him:

> "I wish it could be effected, that grave and learned men from the principal churches might meet together at a place appointed, and, after diligent consideration of each article of faith, hand down to posterity a definite form of doctrine according to their united opinion. But this also is to be reckoned among the greatest evils of our time, that the churches are so estranged from each other, that scarcely the common intercourse of society has place among them; much less that holy communion of the members of Christ, which all persons profess with their lips, though few sincerely honour it in their practice... As far as I am concerned, if I can be of any service, I shall not shrink from crossing ten seas, if need be, for that object... when the object sought after is an agreement of learned men, gravely considered and well framed according to the standard of scripture, by which churches that would otherwise be far separated from each other may be made to unite; I do not consider it right for me to shrink from any labours or difficulties. But I hope my want of ability will occasion me to be excused"[20].

This letter makes it perfectly clear that the unity for which Calvin strove was unity in the truth. His aim unmistakably was the highest possible degree of doctrinal unity. After the death of Edward VI and the flight to the Continent of the English Protestants, Calvin's interest in the English church continued. He attempted to mediate in the dispute over the use of the Prayer Book in the English congregation in Frankfurt, without, however, attaining much success. Yet

---

IRENE DINGEL, "Calvin im Spannungsfeld der Konsolidierung des Luthertums", in HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS (ed.), *Calvinus clarissimus theologus. Papers of the Tenth International Congress on Calvin Research,* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 118-140.

20. H. ROBINSON (ed), *Original Letters relative to the English Reformation* (Parker Society, 1846-7), II, no. CCCXXXVII.

even those who clung most tenaciously to the Book of Common Prayer did not forfeit his regard as Christians.[21] This attitude was continued after the accession of Elizabeth and the organization of the episcopacy, along with the imposition of the Prayer Book on the whole English church.

In all probability, Calvin's application of his views on the church's unity comes out most clearly in connection with the Church of Rome. It is noteworthy that there are two strands in Calvin's thought which must be clearly distinguished. The first strand placed him in the *avant-garde* of mediating and moderate theologians of his time.[22] This is evident in his early writings such as his dedicatory address to Francis I in the *Institutes* of 1536 or his *Reply to Sadolet* of 1539. The issues addressed in these well known texts, which uncover the root of his quarrel with Rome, are not primarily justification by faith, or priestly abuses, or transubstantiation, or prayers to saints, or papal authority. All those subjects come into the discussion; however, beneath all of them, the fundamental question was whether the Reformation was abandonment of the church, schism, heresy, or quite simply the endeavour to assemble the people of God under the "banner of Christ." Calvin's writings of this first phase give some idea of the inner struggle that the break with Rome must have caused him. Yet it was still not clear that the split was permanent. Despite his critical estimation of the Roman Church, during the years 1539 to 1541, he was active with other leading Reformers and urban politicians in efforts to reach the greatest possible degree of agreement with the old church. During his time in Strasbourg as pastor of the French community, Calvin participated in the religious colloquies held at Frankfurt (1539), Hagenau (1540), Worms, and Regensburg (1541), taking every opportunity to work through the controversy about the true church. In Regensburg the participants succeeded even in working out a joint statement on the "double justification," but Luther and the pope both rejected the doctrinal formulation. Even in the treatise *Supplex exhortatio ad Carolum quintum* of 1543, Calvin constantly referred to *the* church, thus giving a glimpse of his view on the catholicity of the church. However, replying to the objection commonly

---

21. IRENE DINGEL, "Religionssupplikationen der Französisch-Reformerten Gemeinde in Frankfurt am Main", in IRENE DINGEL AND HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS (ed.), *Calvin und Calvinismus. Europäische Perspektiven* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &Ruprecht, 2011), 281-296.

22. JON BALSERAK, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France. Calvin's Lectures on the Minor Prophets, 1556-1559* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 19-47.

raised to the Reformers of promoting heresy and creating schism in the church, he argued:

> It is not enough simply to throw out the name of church, but judgment must be used to ascertain which is the true church, and what is the nature of its unity [...] We are as ready to confess as they are that those who abandon the church, the common mother of the faithful, the "pillar and ground of the truth," revolt from Christ also; but we mean a church which, from incorruptible seed, begets children for immortality, and, when begotten, nourishes them with spiritual food (that seed and food being the word of God), and which, by its ministry, preserves entire the truth which God deposited in its bosom. This mark is in no degree doubtful, in no degree fallacious, and it is the mark which God himself impressed upon his church, that she might be discerned thereby.[23]

With the beginning of the Council of Trent in 1545, and the subsequent process of confessionalization, the fronts became entrenched, and it proved increasingly obvious that no consensus would be possible. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this modified Calvin's view of the Roman Church. His mature writings from 1543 onwards reveal a perceptible transition to ambivalence, pessimism und uncharacteristically polemical undertones.[24] The papal church became the opposite of the true church, and it was "better to be separated for the sake of union with Christ than to be united in apostasy."[25] He devoted himself more and more exclusively to the task of restoring the true church of the pure Word of God. One cannot read Calvin's writings since the mid-1540s without being struck by this second strand of his thought. Certainly, much is to be found in Book IV of the *Institutes,* but a great deal can be discovered by looking at various treatises, sermons, letters, and above all, at his commentaries on Scripture which offer Calvin's more mature reflections. A good example can be found in his *Commentary on Isaiah,* first published in 1550. Commenting on Isaiah 28-32, in which the prophet foretells the imminent restoration of the church and proclaims that God will still be gracious to his Church so as to restore her to in-

---

23. *CO* 6, 520. See J.J. STEENKAMP, "Calvin's Exhortation to Charles V (1543)", in WILHELM H.. NEUESER, BRIAN G. ARMSTRONG (eds.), *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 309-314.

24. BALSERAK, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France,* 47-64.

25. MILNER, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church,* 156.

tegrity, Calvin discerned a parallel with the circumstances of his own day and believed that the restoration of the church was not only possible, but necessary.[26]

The same can be seen in another example, namely the exposition of Malachi 2:4. Here Calvin makes an unequivocal statement, remarking that defiance of Roman orders is not defiance of, much less separation from, the (true) church:

> When we resist the papal priests, we do not violate God's covenant, that is, it is no departure from the order of the church, which ought ever to remain sacred and inviolable. We do not then, on account of men's vices, subvert the pastoral office and the preaching of the word; but we assail the men themselves, so that true order may be restored... We therefore boldly attempt to subvert the whole of the papacy, with the full confidence that we minimize nothing of true doctrine... indeed, the order of the church, the preaching of the truth, and the very dignity of pastors, cannot stand unless the church is purged of its defilements and its filth removed.[27]

Calvin evidently understood his work "to be a part of that restorative process of the church...which was there before him, a restoration of the true order of the church, and not a retreat into some ideal church above and beyond this world."[28] God's church had existed at all times. Her original face had been disfigured in the course of history, but now God has moved his Word to purify and infuse new life into his church.

Calvin knew, of course, that the most traditional way of mending the church was the institute of the council. In his preface to the *Acta Synodi Tridentinae cum Antidoto* (1547), he wrote:

> The name of Sacred Council is held in such reverence in the Christian Church, that the very mention of it produces an immediate effect not only on the ignorant but on men of gravity and sound judgment. And doubtless, as the usual remedy which God employed from the beginning in curing the diseases of his Church was for pious and holy pastors to meet, and, after invoking his aid, to determine what the Holy Spirit dictated, Councils are deservedly honored by all the godly. There is this difference, however, – the vulgar, stupified with excessive admiration, do not afterwards make any use of their judgment, whereas those of sounder sense allow themselves, step by step, and modestly, indeed, but still allow themselves to inquire before they ab-

---

26. *CO* 36, 475-476, see PETE WILCOX, "Calvin as commentator on the Prophets", in DONALD K. MCKIM (ed.), *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 107-130, part. 124-126.
   27. *CO* 44, 433.
   28. MILNER, Calvin's Doctrine of the Church, 155.

solutely assent. And so it ought to be, in order that our faith, instead of rashly sub-scribing to the naked decisions of men, may submit to God only.[29]

In his *Institutes,* book four, chapter nine, Calvin wrote about provincial councils, and mostly about general councils and their authority. Of the "ancient councils," he professed, "I venerate them from my heart, and I desire that they be honored by all" (IV.9.1). It can be affirmed that syinodality or conciliarity is a dimension inherent in the nature of Calvin's and even more generally of the Reformed ecclesiology. It emerges in its structure from the principle of *communio,* which postulates the immanence of the universal in the particular and of the particular in the universal. It is determined by the fact that all congregations participate in the same grade of the *notae ecclesiae,* which include the Word and the Sacraments, and from the fact that the Church of Christ is realized with a particular and a universal dimension.

And yet, Calvin was convinced that only the Word is capable of assuming a more universal binding force than the personal pronouncement of a synod or a pronouncement expressed by a conciliar assembly:

> [H]ere the norm is that nothing of course detract from Christ. Now it is Christ's right to preside over all councils and to have no man share his dignity. But I say that he presides only when the whole assembly is governed by his word and Spirit" (IV.9.1). That is to say, any teaching even of a general council falls under, and is overruled by, the higher authority of the Scriptures. And while the authority of councils rests in Christ's promise of his presence where two or three are gathered in his name, this qualifier of "his name" disqualifies all councils which take it upon themselves either to add to, or to take away from, his Word (IV.9.2).

Calvin elaborates for some pages on the problem of councils consisting of evil pastors, and he concludes from this that we certainly must not make the mistake of thinking that the church consists of its councils (IV.9.2-7). And while Calvin willingly embraces and reverences as holy some of the ancient and general councils, such as Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, and

Chalcedon, "for they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture" (IV.9.8), he goes on to show how subsequent councils have contra-

---

29. JOHN CALVIN, *Acta Synodi Tridentinae cum Antidoto, CO* 7:365-506. English Translation Henry Beveridge, *Tracts and Treatises* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), vol. 3: 17-188. Preface to the Antidote.

dicted each other and were marred by serious human failings –even Nicaea suffered from accusations and "foul recriminations" flying back and forth among its participants and presented in writing to Emperor Constantine– so that Calvin finally infers this: "[T]he Holy Spirit so governed the otherwise godly and holy councils as to allow something human to happen to them, lest we should put too much confidence in men" (IV.9.11).

In the second half of the sixteenth century, there was a vogue for political solutions to religious problems. In France, for example, after the death of Henry II (1559), the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici and the Cardinal of Lorraine were attracted to the program actively advanced by a number of churchmen and intellectuals like Michel de l'Hopital and Etienne de la Boetie, the so called "moyenneurs," who proposed healing the religious divisions among Catholics and Protestants through a moderate reform of the established church.[30] In pursuit of this policy, Catherine urged the bishops of the French church to seek an accommodation with the ministers of the new religion and wanted their assent to a religious colloquy which took place at Poissy in 1561.[31] Calvin, who had supplied theological and practical support to the Reformed Churches in France, was particularly scathing about this apparent attempt to compromise on essentials for the sake of political interests. This had not prevented him from sending some suggestions to the Reformed Churches of France in his *Avis pour la tenue d'un concile* of December 1560. Calvin advised:

> Les points de la doctrine qui sont aujourd'huy en dispute sont du service de Dieu, à savoir s'il doibt estre réglé purement et simplement à l' Escriture sainte, ou bien si les hommes en ont pu donner loix, et si leurs traditions peuvent obliger les âmes sur peine de péché mortel. [...]. Après il est question de savoir sur quoy la fiance de nostre salut est fondée, et si nous sommes justifiez par le mérite de nos œuvres, ou par la miséricorde gratuite de Dieu.[32]

---

30. MARIO TURCHETTI, "Une question mal posée: La Confession d' Augsbourg, le cardinal de Lorraine et les moyenneurs au Colloque de Poissy en 1561", *Zwingliana* 20 (1993), 53-101.

31. ALAIN DUFOUR, "Das Religionsgespräch von Poissy. Hoffnungen der Reformierten und der βMoyenneurs'", in: Gerhard Müller, ed., *Die Religionsgespräche der Reformationszeit* (Gütersloh: Mohn 1980), 117-126.

32. JULES BONNET (ed.), *Lettres de Jean Calvin: lettres françaises*, (Paris: C. Meyrueis, 1854), vol. 2, 350-353, here 352.

The Reformer did not attend the colloquy of Poissy. His shaky health and finally his unwavering attitude explain why his trusted lieutenant Theodore Beza was preferred to lead the Genevan delegation. Nonetheless, these little sentences represent an excellent example of Calvin's manner of approaching the question of Christian unity through ecclesiastical assemblies. Calvin's firm conviction was –to put it simply– *to place Jesus Christ at the forefront of the life of the church.* The church cannot rely on tradition or on the strength of existing structures. She depends entirely on the presence of the living Jesus Christ through the power of God's Spirit. Thus it becomes the communion of the "lovers of Christ" (*amateurs du Christ*, preface to Olivetan's Bible translation). It is only against the background of this thinking that we can understand why Calvin, despite his opposition to schism, was prepared to leave the Church of Rome. However, the coherence of this approach is ultimately founded on the firm theological premise that God's faithfulness to his covenant is never totally wiped out by the unfaithfulness of human beings. On account of this, Calvin was even prepared to admit that the Roman Church had not been altogether destroyed. It is still, as he wrote in his commentary on Second Thessalonians 2:4, "The temple of God in which the Pope bears rule, but at the same time profaned by innumerable sacrileges."[33] In a passage of his commentary on Ezekiel 16: 20 he was again free to acknowledge that, although Rome had failed to reciprocate the faithfulness of God, there will always be "a church among them, but hidden and wonderfully preserved."[34]

Does Calvin shows us the way forward in every respect? Of course not. In fact, in retrospect, it can be seen that there are actually limits to Calvin's understanding of the church which have unintentionally fostered divisions in the churches. His passion for clarity of doctrine has left its marks on the Reformed tradition, sometimes with disastrous consequences in the case of lesser minds than Calvin's. The results have been not only clarity, but dogmatism, and all too often division. His overarching intention - to abide in the timeless Word of God, however, has lost none of its relevance. The reformer's biblical perspicacity is his best legacy that can lead us back to sources that hold promise of healing.[35]

---

33. *CO* 52, 199.
34. *CO* 40, 354.
35. See Vischer, *Pia conspiratio.* 50-56.

2. Conciliarity today

2.1. *From Organic Unity to Conciliar Fellowship*

Calvin did offer a preliminary outline in his considerations on Councils, when he showed what role synodal or conciliar structures can have in the life of the church. As already mentioned, syinodality or conciliarity is a dimension inherent in the nature of Calvin's and more generally of Reformed ecclesiology. However, his remarks remained strangely unspecific. He seems not to have realized that the reforms taking place in his times could opened up new horizons for the church and hence new challenges and tasks. The responsibility of finding how the church can respond to new challenges without losing its unity was not one he considered, and it is a duty in which Protestant, but also Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches have failed again and again.[36] Both conservative and progressive forces have settled their disputes by separating and going their own way. A whole range of related foundational issues remain unresolved not only in Rome but also in Geneva and its Ecumenical Centre, the home of the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and various ecumenical agencies: sacraments, ordained ministry, episcopacy, Papal Primacy, women ordination Above all, full communion still does not exist between the Christian churches. There is still a great deal to do in overcoming very old prejudices and dogmatic obstacles.

In contrast to centuries of separation, however, the century of ecumenism since the 1910 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh has created a very different situation.[37] Churches have taken significant steps to move from conflict to communion passing through stages of co-existence, co-operation, convergence, consensus and commitment. A variety of models of unity have been proffered as concepts of the goal of unity.[38] The most compelling example of unity is 'Organic Unity' (cf. 1 Cor 12). This has been a matter of study with deep con-

---

36. Ibidem, 55.

37. Held in June 14 to 23, 1910, it is regarded as the formal beginning of the modern ecumeical movement. See BRIAN STANLEY, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, MI,: Eerdmans, 2009).

38. In the discussion that follows I am indebted to Alan D. Falconer, "Councils, Conferences and Churches Together: Unity in Recognition, Unity in Via", *One in Christ* 46 (2012), 185-210.

cern by those in the Faith and Order Commission and others in various parts of the world. The concept reached its peak at the Third Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi (1961) but gradually began to lose hold on many churches in varying degrees.

The "Conciliar Fellowship" vision articulated in Nairobi in 1975[39] is a foundation on which a more detailed vision of unity has been built:

> The one church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this fellowship each church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith, and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit.

The most widely known work of the modern ecumenical movement, as has been often noted, is the contribution to convergence in the churches' understanding of baptism, Eucharist, and ordained ministry. The "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" text, the so-called Lima Document (1982), has engaged a much wider range of churches in these conversations than those who have produced such dramatic bilateral results in the 1970s.[40] The Canberra text and the World Conference of Faith and Order held in Santiago de Compostela in 1993 can be seen as giving more precision and articulating a new level of convergence in the understanding of the concept of "Conciliar Fellowship", building on earlier Faith and Order work. The theological follow-up of Faith and Order especially on baptism and ordination have been important further steps.[41]

---

39. *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975*, ed. David Paton (London: SPCK, 1976) 60; "Ecumenical Chronicle," *The Ecumenical Review* 26 (1974) 291–98; "Conciliar Fellowship,"in *Building Unity*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Jeffrey Gros, Ecumenical Documents IV (New York: Paulist, 1989), 458-84. Quoted from *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, eds. Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope (Geneva World Council of Churches, 1997), 30.

40. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Report 1982-1990*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990).

41. *So We Believe, So We Pray*, ed. Thomas Best, Dagmar Heller (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995); Thomas F. Best, Dagmar Heller, *Eucharistic Worship in Ecumenical Contexts: The Lima Liturgy and Beyond* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998); *Becoming a Christian*, ed. Thomas Best, Dagmar Heller (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999); *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, ed. Michael Root, Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); *Episkope and Episcopacy within the Quest for Visible Unity* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999).

'Conciliarity' –as we understand it now– is not an alternative to 'Organic Unity' but is a wider understanding of the unity of the Church. Conciliar fellowship is unity in diversity. The unity of the Church has from the beginning existed at the very heart of diversity. Diversity is an essential aspect of true unity. Unity cannot be equated with uniformity which is alien to the nature of the Church. Conciliar fellowship maintains a healthy and creative balance between unity and diversity, affirms and safeguards diversity without weakening unity, and enhances unity without endangering diversity. Conciliar Fellowship has remained until now an important model of unity, and has continued to find expression in the formation of uniting churches, who envisage a conciliar fellowship of churches truly united in each place and in all places. Such conciliar fellowship, however, is currently unattainable because it presupposes a state of communion between the churches taking part that –sad to say– does not exist between the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed Churches.

2.2. *Models of Conciliar Fellowship* in via

While the search for conciliar fellowship is not complete, Christians have entered a new, constructive time of positive relations among themselves, enabling them even now to engage in some degree of mission together, which they were unable to do in the past. These new relationships are documented also in bilateral and multilateral dialogues, in church unions, and in many other ways. They should be celebrated.

A model of unity is that of *reconciled diversity*. This model assumes that the constituent elements of full church unity are agreement on the one apostolic faith, fellowship in baptism and eucharist, and mutual recognition of ordained ministries. Those holding to this model accept that confessional identity, e.g. Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, is the primary legitimate expression of the diversity of the Church. These communions display diverse spiritual gifts, and are essential components of the universal church. This model of unity, therefore, places the focus on the diversity of theological heritage, while for conciliar fellowship the focus is upon cultural diversity. As with the model of conciliar fellowship, there is an awareness that reconciled diversity will involve change and reconciliation, though it clearly envisages that each church and tradition will continue to be autonomous in decision tak-

ing while moving into a situation of recognition and perhaps communion with those of other churches and traditions.

One embodiment of this model of unity may be found in the agreements between individual Churches of different traditions, for example between the Waldensian and the Methodist Churches of Italy through the "integration covenant of 1975," or the Lutheran and Anglican Churches in Canada that have come together in fellowship and communion through an agreement – Called to Full Communion (The Waterloo Declaration) in 2001. Similarly Anglican and Lutheran Churches in the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian and Baltic areas have come together in fellowship and communion in the Porvoo communion of Churches. The Churches acknowledged each other as Churches belonging to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and committed themselves to share a common life in mission and service, to recognize members and ministers, to participate in each other's Episcopal ordinations or setting apart to establish collegial and conciliar consultations on issues of faith and order and on life and work. All of this has been furthered by continuing consultation and contact. The Porvoo Churches remain autonomous Churches due to their character in many instances as established or national churches in different nations, and see their diversity as a stage on the way to full visible unity. Reconciled Diversity for them is not the goal.[42]

Another " of unity emerged from the experience of theologians and churches in Latin America called *Unity in Solidarity.* Those who have most cogently developed this theme are the Central American Jesuit theologians Juan Sobrino and Juan Hernández Pico, José Miguez Bonino, the Methodist theologian from Argentina, and others.[43] For them, unity and catholicity mean "co-respon-

42. *Together in Mission and Ministry :: The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe* (London, Church House Publishing 1993).

43. JON SOBRINO AND JUAN HERNANDEZ PICO, *Theology of Christian Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1985). Bonino reframed the classic ecumenical search for unity in his memorable 1983 Watson lecture "Freedom Through Unity – Liberation Through Ecumenism" at the University of San Francisco: ""Unity" is one of those magical words which can, by its mere invocation, justify a discourse. Whatever produces unity is good; whatever destroys or threatens it is bad. In some areas of the world and some sectors of society, however, experience has taught us to ask questions about the frequent calls to unity that are addressed to us - who calls for unity? with whom? against whom? on what basis? for what purpose? for whose benefit? Such questions may sound impertinent, even narrow-minded and ungenerous. But such people - young people and women in the family, workers in industry, minorities in societies, dependent nations in the

sibility between local churches". This involves mutual giving and receiving, and bearing one another's burdens. It is seen to extend to diverse areas in the churches' lives: liturgy, pastoral issues and matters of faith. The focus is not the relationship between different confessional traditions, but rather their common solidarity, suffering with the poor. The fundamental division in this model is the alienation between rich and poor, between the oppressed and the oppressors. Clearly here the model of unity is focused on our contemporary world. It calls the churches to embody the unity of the church as a sign of God's intention for humankind. The focus is on unity so that the world may believe.

Last but not least, there is in the Protestant world the model of *Councils, Conferences,* which are increasingly becoming the theatres of ecumenical space and time. They are spaces in which the issues which divide the Churches can be addressed while the fellowship of the churches is maintained. The fellowship of the Churches does not assume the unity of the Church, but works towards the resolution of conflicts so that communion can be strengthened on the way towards the manifestation of visible unity. In these fora, churches are invited to be both self-reflective and self- critical. In the exchange of insights, in the mutual questioning and challenging, perspectives which may not have been central to their understanding are received and their horizons broadened. This model of conciliarity is understood as the readiness to join in a shared process of learning, to engage in a search for what binds the churches together in the light of their common origin and for how tradition is realized in the light of present circumstances and demands. It means discussing with one another and sharing insights, anxieties and experiences with one another. Voices from all the church people are heard, the silent testimony of theologians condemned to dumbness also finds a hearing. In conclusion, councils are the crucible in which the churches receive the Gospel afresh. Councils, Conferences keep before all churches the call and challenge to manifest unity.

---

world, lay people in the churches, in general the poor and marginal, have so frequently discovered that such unity was simply co-option, for the sake of the economy, the authority, the comfort of the powerful, that they have become convinced that as often as not "unity" is a tool of oppression rather than of liberation. For them –and this is the perspective from which I try to speak today– the positive, even causal relation between freedom and unity implied in our title can by no means be taken for granted. Except, in any case, if it be corrected, supplemented and explicated by the obverse formulation: 'unity through freedom, ecumenism through liberation'". Quoted from http://homepage.accesscable.net/~dpoirier/sfo83txt.htm.

Is it possible to practice already now this model of conciliarity? It is here above all that I see the decisive unanswered question of this paper: how to resolve the tension between old and new conciliarity? Calvin was not aware that precisely with the Reformation a new threshold was to be crossed, but offers an important pointer for a constructive solution to this question. Let us listen again to him:

> For at the present day the Church is not far from despair, plundered, scattered, and everywhere crushed and trodden underfoot. What must be done in straits so numerous and distressing? We ought to lay hold of these promises so as to believe that still God will preserve the Church. To whatever extent the body may be torn, shivered into fragments and scattered, still by his Spirit he will easily unite the members and will never allow the remembering and calling on his name to perish. Out of those fragments which are now broken and scattered the Lord will unite and assemble the people.[44]

---

44. *Comm. Isaiah* 18:7, CO 36, 326.