

CALVIN AND CHURCH GOVERNMENT

JAMES HUFF¹

Alister McGrath, in his book *A Life of John Calvin*, states,

Whereas Luther regarded the organization of the church as a matter of historical contingency, not requiring theological prescription, Calvin held that a definite pattern of church government was prescribed by scripture. Curiously, the lists of ecclesiastical offices (IV, iii.3; IV, iii.4; IV, iv.1) which Calvin presents within the *Institutes [of the Christian Religion]* do not harmonize, and leave both the status of elders (or presbyters) and the number of ministries in some doubt.²

In Book 4 of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin focuses on a number of issues regarding the church. McGrath speaks of Calvin's "experience as an organizer." Calvin focuses on exact particulars and does not deal in "general abstractions."

In the *Institutes* Calvin writes about "The Condition of the Ancient Church and the Kind of Government in Use Before the Papacy."³ There he traces the departure of the Papacy from the practice of the ancient church and from Scriptural teaching in regard to church government. In the *Institutes* Calvin writes,

We have stated that Scripture sets before us three kinds of ministers. Similarly, 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.

"Readers" and "acolytes," however, were not the names of definite offices; it was these whom they called "clerics," and whom through definite exercises they trained from youth to serve the church in order that they might better understand the purpose for which they had been appointed and might, in time, be more ready to step into office. This I shall soon show more fully.

Therefore, Jerome, on setting forth five church orders, lists bishops, presbyters, deacons, believers, and catechumens; he gives no special place to the remaining clergy and monks.⁴

Basically Calvin upholds the position that "bishop" and "presbyter" are the same office. "All those to whom the office of teaching was enjoined they [the ancient church] called

¹ James Huff is the Pastor of the First Bible Presbyterian Church in Kalispell, Montana.

² P. 171.

³ 4.4.

⁴ 4.4.1, pp. 1068-1069.

‘presbyters.’”⁵ Calvin agrees with this. He does recognize that in each city the presbyters chose one to be bishop

in order that dissensions might not arise (as commonly happens) from equality of rank. Still, the bishop was not so much higher in honor and dignity as to have lordship over his colleagues. But the same functions that the consul has in the senate—to report on business, to request opinions, to preside over others in counseling, admonishing, and exhorting, to govern the whole action by his authority, and to carry out what was decreed by common decision—the bishop carried out in the assembly of presbyters.

And the ancients themselves admit that this was introduced by human agreement to meet the need of the times.

Calvin does note, though, that the bishop, “while he surpassed the others in dignity, he was subject to the assembly of his brethren.”⁶ He also quoted Ignatius that in the ancient church:

Afterward, to remove seeds of dissensions, all oversight was committed to one person. Just as the presbyters, therefore, know that they are, according to the custom of the church, subject to him who presides, so the bishops recognize that they are superior to the presbyters more according to the custom of the church than by the Lord’s actual arrangement, and that they ought to govern the church in co-operation with them. Jerome, however, tells us in another place what an ancient arrangement it was. For he says that at Alexandria from the time of the Evangelist Mark to that of Heraclas and Dionysius, the presbyters always elected one of their number and set him in a higher rank, calling him “bishop.”⁷

Higher ranks, e.g., “archbishops and patriarchs” were established in the ancient church primarily for matters of discipline. Calvin recognizes that these offices are not taught in the Scriptures, yet he graciously says “that the ancient bishops did not intend to fashion any other form of church rule than that which God has laid down in His word.”⁸

In his *Commentary on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* concerning 1 Tim 5:17-21, Calvin mentions that “elder” is not a “name of age, but of office,”⁹ and concerning Tit 1:5-6, he states

Presbyters or elders. It is well known, that it was not on account of age, that they received this appellation; for sometimes those who were still young—such as Timothy—were admitted to this rank. But in all languages it has been customary to apply this honorable designation to all rulers. Although we may conclude, from I Tim 5:17, that there were two classes of presbyters, the context will immediately show, that here none

⁵ *Institutes* 4.4.2 (p. 1069).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.4.2 (p. 1070).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.4.2 (pp.1069-1070).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.4.4.

⁹ P. 137.

other than teachers are meant, that is, those who were ordained to teach; for immediately afterwards, he will call the same persons “bishops.”¹⁰

Calvin also recognizes the office of deacon as established in God’s word. In his *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, concerning Acts 6:1-6 (page 229) he states,

Luke declareth here upon what occasion, and to what end, and also with what rite, deacons were first made. He saith, When there arose a murmuring amongst the disciples, it was appeased by this remedy, as it is said in the common proverb, Good laws have taken their beginning of evil manners. And it may seem to be a strange thing, seeing that this is a function so excellent and so necessary in the Church, why it came not into the apostles’ minds at the first (before there was any such occasion ministered) to appoint deacons, and why the Spirit of God did not give them such counsel which they take now, being, as it were, enforced thereunto. But that which happened was both better then, and is also more profitable for us at this day, to be unto us an example. If the apostles had spoken of choosing deacons before any necessity did require the same, they should not have had the people so ready; they should have seemed to avoid labor and trouble; many would not have offered so liberally into the hands of other men. Therefore, it was requisite that the faithful should be convinced by experience, that they might choose deacons willingly, whom they saw they could not want; and that through their own fault.¹¹

Calvin contrasts this office and how it was to be carried out with that which was done by the Roman Catholics.

The Popish bishops did suck up great riches under color of the ministration or deaconship; nevertheless, they entangled themselves in divers business, which they were scarce able to overcome, though everyone of them had had ten heads. Notwithstanding, such is their wickedness, that they say that there can be no church unless it be drowned in this depth; neither do they cease to brag and boast that they are successors of the apostles, whereas there is nothing which appeareth to be more contrary.¹²

Furthermore, concerning deacons, as mentioned in 1 Tim 3:8-13, Calvin wrote,

Likewise the deacons. There is no reason why the diversity of interpretations should lead us to entertain any doubt. It is certain that the Apostle speaks of those who hold a public office in the Church; and this refutes the opinion of those who think that domestic servants are here meant. As to the view given by others, that it denotes presbyters who are inferior to the bishop, that is without foundation; for it is manifest from other passages, that the term bishop belongs alike to all presbyters. All are constrained to acknowledge this; and more especially a passage in the first chapter of the Epistle to Titus proves clearly that this is the meaning (Tit 1:7). It remains to be stated that we

¹⁰ P. 290.

¹¹ *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 229.

¹² *Ibid.*, 233.

understand “the deacons” to be those who are mentioned by Luke (Acts 6:3), and who had the charge of the poor.”¹³

In regard to the matter of whether one person should appoint a minister for a particular church or whether the church has the right of choosing, Calvin states that to take away this right from the church or from the College of Pastors the right of judging would almost wholly profane “the sacred administration of the Church.”¹⁴

Calvin plainly writes that it is a man who is to be an elder or deacon based upon the qualifications given in Scripture. This is an area of unfortunate departure in several Presbyterian and other Reformed groups, including the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the Christian Reformed Church.

There are many other areas of church government with which Calvin deals—many of which are of a practical nature. This writer would certainly recommend further reading in the aforementioned references.

¹³ *Commentary on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 85-86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 290.