



# To cross ten seas: Calvin on the unity of the church – a contribution to a more responsible ecclesiology<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

### **To cross ten seas: Calvin on the unity of the church – a contribution to a more responsible ecclesiology**

*As far as ecclesiology is concerned, Calvin experienced a great dilemma during his lifetime. On the one hand, there was the clear teaching of Scripture on the unity of the church of Christ, as confirmed by the great church father Augustine. On the other hand, a separation from the Catholic Church of the sixteenth century was unavoidable. Calvin wrestled intensely with this problem and tried to adhere to biblical teaching on unity. He was disappointed that the Protestant churches distanced themselves from the theme of unity and declared himself willing to cross ten seas in order to recapture this unity. This leaves us with the question to what extent the reformational churches today take the (visible) unity of the church of Christ seriously.*

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1 From the beginning it was a foregone conclusion to me that I would write an article on Calvin for this *Festschrift* honouring my colleague, Callie Coetzee. Anybody studying Coetzee's writings soon comes under the impression of the enormous influence Calvin had on his thinking. The fact that the article is published in English is due to circumstance as this is a reworking of a presentation I delivered on 2 March 2009 in Benoni during a meeting of the Konvent van Reformatoriese Kerke in Suider-Afrika. I would like to express my appreciation towards my colleague for his contribution to the development of reformational theology in South Africa.

## **Opsomming**

### **Om tien oseane oor te steek: Calvyn oor die eenheid van die kerk – 'n bydrae tot 'n meer verantwoordelike ekklesiologie**

*Ten opsigte van ekklesiologie het Calvyn in sy tyd voor 'n besonder groot dilemma te staan gekom. Enersyds was daar duidelike Skrifgetuienis oor die eenheid van die kerk van Christus, soos onder andere ook deur die groot kerkvader Augustinus beaam is. Andersyds was die breuk met die Katolieke Kerk van die sestiende eeu onvermydelik. Calvyn worstel diepgaande met hierdie problematiek en probeer so ver moontlik vashou aan die Skrifgetuienis oor die eenheid. Hy was teleurgesteld dat die protestantse kerke die tema van die eenheid losgelaat het en hy verklaar hom bereid om tien oseane oor te steek om hierdie eenheid te probeer herwin. Dit alles laat die vraag ontstaan in watter mate die reformatoriese kerke vandag nog erns maak met die (sigbare) eenheid van die kerk van Christus.*

## **1. Introduction**

Ever since I read the *Institutes* of John Calvin (in the summary of A. Duvenage, 1951; Calvyn, 1978) when I was sixteen/seventeen years old in 1953/1954, I was attracted and fascinated by the theology of Calvin. Of course, that was the only theologian known to me at that stage.

I was surprised that no in-depth study of Calvin was done during my theological studies at Potchefstroom (1955-1961). The *Doppers* were usually referred to as *Calvinists* and yet there was no special attention paid to Calvin. Yes, there were many references to Calvin, but there was no specific focus on the theology of Calvin. This situation drastically changed during the eighties when my colleague, L.F. Schulze, introduced a course on Calvin and since then Calvin became part and parcel of the curriculum.

I want to start with a kind of provocative statement – a discovery which I once made and which came as a shock to me personally: if you apply the principle of the *sola Scriptura* seriously with regard to ecclesiology, you have to conclude that the protestant tradition in general and the reformed tradition in particular have positioned themselves a long way from the biblical teaching on the unity of the church (cf. Van Wyk, 2008:507-525). In the New Testament there is no reference whatsoever that individual Christians, or a group of Christians, should withdraw from a local *ekklesia* or other *ekklesiai* to establish a new (what we now call) “denomination” over against

the other existing *ekklesiai*. Nowhere is there any sign, any suggestion or any command for any kind of division, disunity, disruption, dissension, separation, fragmentation or schism.

The New Testament, from beginning to end, emphasises the unity, the harmony, the completeness and the integrity of the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 10:16, 17:21; Rom. 12:16; 1 Cor. 1). There is *one* body, *one* Spirit, *one* hope, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father (Eph. 4:4-6). In the light of the New Testament ecclesiology a divided church is a *contradictio in terminis*.

Certainly, the New Testament is full of warnings against fallacious doctrine and wrong practice, against misleading, misguidance, deception and strange teaching (Phil. 3:2; Col. 2:16-23; 2 Thess. 2:3; Heb. 13:9; 2 John 7-8). But the way indicated for dealing with these deviations and heresies is admonition and excommunication (Matt. 18:15-17).

I must add that *unity* does not imply *uniformity*. Alongside unity the New Testament also refers to a diversity and variety in and among the *ekklesiai*, for instance as far as liturgy is concerned. There was – to use a modern slogan – unity in essentials, mildness in moderate things and in all things love. (The Latin version reads: *in necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in utrisque caritas*.)

It is therefore wrong, as was done by Käsemann and Van Aarde (cf. Van Wyk, 2008:519), to conclude from the notion of the *diversity* in the New Testament to the notion of *division* and *disunity* in the church, and in so doing justifying the modern divisions in the church where denominations are uncritically accepted – and sometimes even promoted. Calvin as a Biblical scholar must have been aware of this fact and it is interesting to investigate the question how he dealt with this matter.

But there is something else. Calvin was not only a Bible student, he was also a great supporter of the theology of the great North African theologian, Aurelius Augustine, whom he liked to quote many times in his *Institutes* – not less than 410 times. He was fully aware of the fact that for a long period Augustine had fought against the schismatic Donatists in North Africa who had little or no confessional differences with the Catholic Church of those days. The Donatists, however, favoured an absolutely pure and perfect church, while Augustine viewed the church as a *corpus permixtum*. Augustine therefore criticised the Donatists because of their uncharitable and

proud attitude and approach. Anyone who divides the church of Christ must estimate him-/herself a better Christian than the other(s), Augustine argued (for a summary of this debate cf. Van Wyk, 2002:26-32).

Augustine could never live in peace with a divided church and a disrupted body of Christ. Would Calvin follow in the footsteps of his mentor in this regard?

## 2. Calvin and the unity of the church<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 Calvin's *Institutes*

It is a well-known fact that Calvin deals with the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) in Book 4 of his *Institutes* as part of the *external means* or helps by which God invites us to fellowship with Christ – after having dealt in Books 1-3 with God and creation, Jesus Christ and salvation and the Holy Spirit and sanctification. He reminds us that we can only believe *in* God and not *in* the church (*Inst.* 4.1.2). Ecclesiology deals with “external means”.

According to Calvin the Scriptures speak of the church in two ways, namely the *invisible* church, who are the elect and only known to God,<sup>3</sup> and the *visible* church, that is “the whole body of mankind scattered throughout the world”, including hypocrites “who have nothing of Christ but the name and the outward appearance” (*Inst.* 4.1.7).

He draws attention to the fact – with reference to Augustine – that the church is called catholic or universal “for two or three [churches] cannot be invented without dividing Christ; and that is impossible” (*Inst.* 4.1.2). Calvin considers the apostates who delight in producing schisms in [visible] churches *detestable* (*Inst.* 4.1.5).

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2 For general overviews on Calvin and his theology cf. the following: Ganoczy (1968); Wendel (1978); Niesel (1980); Bouwsma (1988); Wallace (1988); De Greeff (1989); McGrath (1991); Parker (1995); Cottret (2000); Randall (2006); Balke (2008); Parter (2008); De Gruchy (2009); Selderhuis (2009b); cf. Selderhuis (2009a). For Calvin on the church cf. Richel (1942); Nijenhuis (1959); Milner (1970); Speelman (1994). Shorter studies on church unity include Durand (1964); Hanekom (1964); Nauta (1965); Duvenage (1967); Walker (1984); Van 't Spijker (1990), Runia (1997:262-264).

3 Cf. Van 't Spijker (1990:143-162) on the importance of predestination for Calvin's ecclesiology. One has to keep in mind also Calvin's many conversations with the Lutherans and Zwinglians in this regard.

Calvin draws another distinction in his ecclesiology. He also differentiates between the *universal* church and the *particular* churches. The first includes “the multitude collected out of all nations”, and the latter refers to particular churches “which exist in different towns and villages, according to the wants of human society” (*Inst.* 4.1.9).

He also distinguishes between *true* and *false* churches and argues that

wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard [sic], wherever we see the [two] sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have doubt that the [true visible] church of God has some existence (*Inst.* 4.1.9).

It is remarkable that Calvin only refers to the two *notae ecclesiae* and not three, like Bucer, who also included church discipline. This does not mean that discipline is unimportant to Calvin, for he would later argue that while “the saving doctrine of Christ is the life [soul] of the church, so discipline is, as it were, its sinews” (*Inst.* 4.12.1).

It is striking that Calvin not only refers to the [pure] preaching of the Word of God, but also to the *hearing* of that Word (cf. also *Inst.* 4.1.10). On one occasion he just refers to the *Word* as the true mark of the true church (*Inst.* 4.2.4).

Where you find the [two] marks of the true church you may not destroy the unity of the church. “Revolt from the church is denial of God and Christ; wherefore there is the more necessity to beware of a dissent so iniquitous.” (*Inst.* 4.1.10.)

With such a high view of the unity of the church Calvin was willing to draw far-reaching consequences. Therefore

we are never to discard it [the true church] so long as these [two marks] remain, though it may otherwise teem with numerous faults. Nay, even in the administration of word and sacraments defects may creep in which ought not to alienate us from its communion (*Inst.* 4.1.12).

At this point of his argument Calvin introduces a very important distinction, namely between *essential* and *non-essential* things in the Christian faith. He writes:

All the heads of true doctrine are not in the same position. Some are so necessary to be known, that all must hold them to be fixed and undoubted as the proper essentials of religion: for

instance, that God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like. Others again, which are the subject of controversy among churches, do not destroy the unity of the faith. (*Inst.* 4.1.12.)

In this regard Calvin refers to the question whether the soul after death “flies to heaven” or “lives with the Lord”.<sup>4</sup>

With this distinction made, Calvin immediately qualifies and clarifies his view:

I have no wish to patronise even the minutest errors, as if I thought it right to foster them by flattery or connivance; what I say, is that we are not on account of every minute difference to abandon a church, provided it retain sound and unimpaired that doctrine in which the safety of piety consists, and keep the use of sacraments instituted by the Lord. (*Inst.* 4.1.12.)

Our indulgence must extend very far in tolerating imperfection of conduct in the church. In this regard Calvin refers inter alia to the views of the Donatists and the Anabaptists<sup>5</sup> and remarks that in a world of sin we would look in vain “for a church altogether free from blemish (Matth xiii)” (*Inst.* 4.1.13).

In order to substantiate his argument that it is wrong to separate from the church too easily, Calvin turns to the teaching of the Old and New Testament. He thinks of the church of Corinth: “it was not a few that erred, but almost the whole body had become tainted ... There was not only corruption in manners, but also in doctrine”. And what was the reaction of Paul in these circumstances? “Does he seek separation from them? Does he discard them from the kingdom of Christ? Does he strike them with the thunder of a final anathema?” None of these, “but he acknowledges and heralds them as a church of Christ, and a society of saints” (*Inst.* 4.1.14).

Calvin also refers to the Galatians “who had done all but abandon the gospel (Gal. 1.6), and yet among them the same apostle [Paul] found churches” (*Inst.* 4.1.14; cf. also 4.1.19, 27).

Calvin rejects every form of individualism. “Although the church fail in her duty, it does not therefore follow that every private individual is

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4 Nijenhuis (1959:282) draws attention to the fact that Calvin does not include the doctrine of predestination here.

5 Cf. Balke (1977).

to decide the question of separation for himself.” What is at stake, for instance, at the Lord’s Supper is not the examination of the *church* of Christ but the *self* (*Inst.* 4.1.15). Those who want a completely perfect church must be cautioned that their zeal and enthusiasm could end up with “no church at all” (*Inst.* 4.1.17).<sup>6</sup>

Calvin also points to the approach of Christ, his apostles and almost all the prophets. They never rejected the decadent church and never started new churches, but preserved the unity while preaching against what was wrong and untenable (*Inst.* 4.1.19).

What do we find in the Old Testament? “Religion was partly despised, partly adulterated, while with regard to morals, we meet everywhere with accounts of theft, robbery, perfidy, murder, and similar crimes.” And what did the prophets do? They “did not ... form new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which they might have separated sacrifices”.

Nothing, therefore, prevented them from separating themselves, but a desire of preserving unity. But if the holy prophets felt no obligation to withdraw from the church on account of the very numerous and heinous crimes, not of one or two individuals, but almost of the whole people, we arrogate too much to ourselves, if we presume forthwith to withdraw from the communion of the church, because the lives of all accord not with our judgement, or even with the Christian profession. (*Inst.* 4.1.18.)

Now Calvin has to take a next step. Thus far he argued, on the basis of the Old and New Testament, that separation from the church is wrong, even in the case of a discredited and denigrated church. In the light of this, how could the split with the Roman Catholic Church of his days be justified, especially when we consider that Rome and Israel are regularly being compared (*Inst.* 4.1.3, 7, 8, 9)? Were the “proper essentials of religion” lacking in Rome?

When Calvin compares the true and false churches with one another, he reminds us that in the case of the true church we consider “the fundamental doctrine of religion”, without which the church

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6 Cf. also Calvin’s Geneva Catechism of 1541 on the question: “What is meant by the word Catholic or Universal?”: “... there are not several churches but one only, which is extended throughout the whole world (Eph. 4:15; 1 Cor. 12:12,27)” (Torrance, 1959:20).

“must necessarily fall”. “Trivial errors” in the ministry of the church “ought not to make us regard it as illegitimate” (*Inst.* 4.2.1).

In his analysis of the Roman Church, referred to as Papacy, Calvin concludes that “doctrine ... is wholly buried and exploded, the public assemblies are schools of idolatry and impiety”. Therefore Calvin argues that “we run no risk of being dissevered from the church of Christ in declining fatal participation in such wickedness” (*Inst.* 4.2.2; cf. *Inst.* 4.2.5). The great error of the Romanists is that *the* mark of the true church is lacking there, namely the Word of God (*Inst.* 4.2.4, 7).<sup>7</sup> In comparison with Israel Calvin asks: “who may presume to give the name church, without reservation, to that [Roman] assembly by which the word of God is openly and with impunity trampled underfoot – where his ministry, its chief support, and the very soul of the church, is destroyed?” (*Inst.* 4.2.7). But did not Calvin discover so much decay and decadence in the Old Testament church and yet still accepted it as *church* of God, and therefore rejected a schism? Why not the same approach as far as the Romanists/Papists are concerned? There is only one answer to this question: The Papists “have a grosser idolatry, and in doctrine are not one whit more pure; rather, perhaps, they are even still more impure” (*Inst.* 4.2.9). While the prophets of Israel were never compelled to take part in any superstitious worship, participation in a worship with the Papists implies “polluting ourselves with open idolatry” – and then Calvin refers to the Mass, “which we abominate as the greatest sacrilege” (*Inst.* 4.2.9).

Therefore, according to Calvin, the situation of the reformers of the sixteenth century differed from that of the prophets of old Israel. The latter were not obliged to witness or use any (ungodly) ceremonies, even when they were present, but [only] those which were instituted by God (*Inst.* 4.2.9). The prophets could obey the commands of God while the reformers were compelled, by the Roman Church, to transgress them.

The next question is unavoidable: How then should we view the Roman Church? Is it still a church or did it degenerate into a non-church? The answer by Calvin on this question is ambivalent – yes and no.

On the one hand Calvin says:

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7 For Calvin the unity of the church rests on two pillars: pure doctrine and brotherly love (*Inst.* 4.2.5).



As in ancient times, there remained among the Jews certain special privileges of a church, so in the present day we deny not to the Papists those vestiges of a church which the Lord has allowed to remain among them amid the dissipation. (*Inst.* 4.2.11).

Baptism stays effective as a true sign of the covenant.<sup>8</sup> Although the Roman Church was ruined, amid the devastation the edifice remained (*Inst.* 4.2.11).

Calvin is unwilling “simply to concede the name of church to the Papists”, but, on the other hand, “we do not deny that there are churches among them” (*Inst.* 4.2.12). “In one word, I call them churches, inasmuch as the Lord there wondrously preserves some remains of his people, though miserably torn and scattered ...” (*Inst.* 4.2.12).

In conclusion: Did Calvin not end up with what he had rejected right from the start, namely a schism? Calvin replies that the reformers were “expelled by anathemas and curses” and that they “were cast out”, but what they had done was for the name of Christ. “It behoved [the reformers] to withdraw from them [the Romanists] in order to draw near to Christ.” (*Inst.* 4.2.6.) Both were true: they were expelled and they also withdrew (were compelled to withdraw).<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2 Calvin's commentaries

When we consult the Bible commentaries of Calvin on the question of the unity of the church, we discover the same trend although not as explicit as in the *Institutes*.

Because of the lack of space I will only focus on two key passages, namely 1 Corinthians 1:13 (“Is Christ divided?”) and Ephesians 4:4-6, where reference is made to one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Keep in mind that the reformers had been baptised in the Roman Church (Parker, 1995:134).

9 Cf. Walker (1984:224): “While thus allowing a sort of escape clause for the individual conscience, Calvin nonetheless uses the strongest possible language to condemn the sin of schism.”

10 See also Calvin’s comments on John 10:16: “That is, that all the children of God [Jews and Gentiles] may be gathered and united into one body; as we

With regard to 1 Corinthians 1:13 Calvin comments:

For we must be one body, if we would be kept together under him [Christ] as our head. If, on the other hand, we are split asunder into different bodies, we start aside from him also. Hence to glory in his name amidst strifes and parties is to tear him in pieces: which indeed is impossible, for never will he depart from unity and concord, because 'He cannot deny himself' (2 Tim. 2:13)! Paul, therefore, by setting before them this absurdity, designs to lead the Corinthians to perceive that they are estranged from Christ, inasmuch as they are divided, for *then* only does he reign in us, when we have him as the bond of an inviolably sacred unity. (Calvin, 1948a:67.)

With regard to Ephesians 4:4-6 Calvin remarks:

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! And yet, strangely enough, while we forget the duties which brethren owe to each other, we go on boasting that we are sons of God. Let us learn from Paul, that none are at all fit for that inheritance who are not one body and one spirit. (Calvin, 1948b:268.)

He continues:

The frequent repetition of the word *one* is emphatic. *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 man. (Calvin, 1948b:260.)

### **2.3 Calvin's correspondence**

The Dutch theologian W. Nijenhuis made a thorough investigation into the letters of Calvin and discovered a far-reaching congruency between the contents of the letters and the *Institutes*. Calvin maintained many contacts and conversations with Lutheran, Zwinglian

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acknowledge that there is one holy universal Church, and there must be one body with one head." (Calvin, 1949:408.)

and Anglican communities and according to him the differences between the churches of the Reformation should not have affected their essential unity (Nijenhuis, 1959:219). The idea that the church of Christ concurs with the reformed churches, while the others like the Lutherans and Anglicans are false churches or sects, was unfamiliar to Calvin (Durand, 1964:180; cf. Polman, s.a.:234, 362).<sup>11</sup>

As far as church government is concerned, Nijenhuis (1959:210) concludes that Calvin did not nurse any objections against the episcopacy as such (cf. Boon, 1965:201-202; Walker, 1984:214; Plomp, 1969).

In this regard reference must be made to the well-known letter of 1552 which Calvin wrote to archbishop Thomas Cranmer in which he states that the body of Christ “lies bleeding” and that he is willing “with pleasure to cross ten seas” to attend a church conference as visualised by Cranmer. “It must be counted among the worst evils of our epoch that the churches are thus separated from one another”, Calvin wrote to Cranmer (Nijenhuis, 1959:209; cf. Wendel, 1978:310). Calvin was of the opinion that differences in liturgy and church order should not be a cause for disunity, if there is unity in doctrine (Nijenhuis, 1959:303).<sup>12</sup>

According to Nijenhuis Calvin also took a flexible approach as far as church ceremonies are concerned. According to Calvin *externi ritus* belong to the *mediae res* which asks for tolerance among Christians (Nijenhuis, 1959:213; cf. also Nauta, 1965:132, 140; Durand, 1964:180; Duvenage, 1967:16-21; Niesel, 1980:206).

Nijenhuis (1959:220) concludes his study with the observation that Calvin, with the view of greater unity among the evangelical churches, was willing to exclude from discussion views that were dear to him: views of confessional nature (predestination), of

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11 Calvin was willing to subscribe to the *Confessio Augustana* (Nijenhuis, 1959:179, 233). It is intriguing that Calvin advised in favour of a new confession for England, which indicates that he did not view the confession as a matter of exclusion but as a symbol of visible unity (Nijenhuis, 1959:204).

12 Wallace (1988:150) mentions that Calvin (in 1560) proposed that a council should be held, free as well as universal, to “appease all the troubles in Christendom”. Calvin was willing that the pope could chair it, provided the latter agreed to submit to the decisions of the assembly. Cf. also Walker (1984:230).

liturgical nature (austerity) and of church government (discipline, offices).<sup>13</sup>

Whether we agree or disagree with this conclusion, there cannot be any doubt that the ecumenical ecclesiology of Calvin had a much broader scope than the reformed ecclesiologies which developed after him.<sup>14</sup>

### **3. Conclusion**

The New Testament teaching on the (visible) unity of the church of Christ is evident and indisputable, *that* unity which Christ prayed for so passionately so that the world might believe that the Father had sent Him as Saviour to the world (John 17:21).

What was inconceivable in the New Testament (schism), what Augustine found unacceptable (division), what Calvin viewed as highly problematic (disunity), what Bavinck hesitantly accepted as a last resort (separation), in the period of the post-Reformation has become a real possibility and nowadays an obvious fact – in some extreme cases even a principle. Continuing separation is a must on the way of finding a (more) true church. Church division is no longer experienced by Christians as a sin against God and a contradiction of the prayer of Christ.

We protestant Christians have almost totally lost the views expressed by John Calvin on the unity of the church of Christ, which were reformulated by Bavinck (1930:300-301) in the following words:

It cannot be denied that the endless separation of the believers of Christ gives the world reason for joy and mockery, and is a cause for the world's unbelief in the One sent by the Father, because they don't see the unity of the believers in Christ (John

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13 The following view of Hanekom (1964:151) is therefore outdated: "Organisational unification of the churches at an institutional level falls outside his [Calvin's] programme", as well as the fact that although Calvin pleads for "one church", this does not imply "one denomination". (Translated from Afrikaans – JHvW.)

14 Consider the following illustration of the Presbyterian churches in Brazil: Presbyterian Church of Brazil (biggest); Independent Presbyterian Church; Conservative Presbyterian Church; Fundamentalist Presbyterian Church; Charismatic Presbyterian Church; United Presbyterian Church (cf. Bauswein & Vischer, 1999).

17:21). We as Christians cannot abase ourselves enough because of the division and discord which has existed in the church of Christ through the ages. It is a sin against God, in contrast with the prayer of Christ and caused by the darkness of our reason and the lovelessness of our heart.<sup>15</sup>

Reaching this conclusion I do not suggest for one moment that all Christian denominations should merge overnight ignoring all the confessional differences. All I am saying is that Christians should reconsider their current ecclesiology in the light of biblical ecclesiology. I know that the road to (visible) unity is a long and difficult one, covered with many obstacles; I know that many discussions, accompanied by many prayers, are needed.

But I also know that God has given us three indestructible promises:

- First, the promise of the Father that He Who began a good work in us will carry it to completion until the day of Christ (Phil. 1:6).
- Secondly, we have the promise and prayer of the Son, Who triumphed over sin and death and demons, that He will be with us always, to the very end of the ages (Matt. 28:20).
- Thirdly, we have the promise that the Holy Spirit will guide his church into all truth (John 16:13).

It is true that the nearer we come to Christ, the nearer we will come to our Christian brothers and sisters. Our present church divisions may be an indication that we ourselves are far from Christ.

The realisation of the unity of the church of Christ is in the last instance a question about our trust in God. Do we really trust God

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15 Cf. also Barth (1960:754):

There is no theological, spiritual or biblical justification for the existence of such a diversity of divided churches, which exclude and oppose one another internally and externally. 'Many churches' in this sense of the word means: many Lords, many Spirits, many Gods. As long as Christianity exists in different and opposing churches, it denies in practice what it confesses in theory, namely the unity and the uniqueness of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Cf. also Coetzee (2009:17): "Anybody who takes the unity of the church lightly, does not find himself/herself in the thought and tradition of Calvin. In the GKSA we should go out of our way to conserve the unity." (Translated from the Afrikaans – JHvW.) And: "Therefore the unity is a sacred calling and instruction which (we) should seek in prayer untiring" (Coetzee, 2006b:31). (Translated from Afrikaans – JHvW.) (Cf. further Coetzee, 2006a:156-167.)

that He Himself will fulfil the prayer of Christ for the unity of the church – *so that the world may believe?*

Nowadays we often see the following words on our TV screens : *please switch off the non-essential appliances*. That is precisely what Calvin teaches us if we want to make progress with the unification of the divided church of Christ.

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**Key concepts:**

Calvin  
disunity  
ecumenicity  
unity, church

**Kernbegrippe:**

Calvyn  
eenheid, kerk  
ekumenisiteit  
verskeurdheid