

Theology Matters

Theological Conflict: A Perspective from the Early Church

By Gary Neal Hansen

We are in a time of theological conflicts in the PC(USA). Conflicts over ordination standards and Christology have lingered on and become rancorous. People on opposite sides of the issues look at the Church and are shocked. The Church, we think, should be a community marked by peace and love, but bitter words are spoken and hatreds brew in our midst. The Church, we think, should be a community marked by sound Biblical and Reformed theology, but each side of each issue has a hard time identifying the opposing side and their ideas as Christian. The Church, we think, should be a community marked by faithfulness, holiness, righteousness, and justice, but each side accuses the other of falling down in just these crucial ways.

Some Presbyterian Christians believe that time for drastic action has come: the other side, each side says, has gone too far and we can no longer live together as the Church. The time for division has come, they say. Some call for an “amicable divorce” borrowing a tragic practice from our culture and claiming it as a virtue. Some see division as presenting no problem, since they say the other side, whichever side is “other,” has ceased to be the Church by its theological or behavioral failings. Others choose to practice “resistance” or “civil disobedience” effectively disregarding the discipline of the Church.

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We seem to assume that the current situation of tension and conflict over profound issues is unusual. It is not. What is unusual is that because of conflict of a few decades duration many of us are ready to abandon the unity of the Church.

Conflict has always been a part of the life of the Church. It should surprise no one that we differ and argue, even on the most basic issues. However, Christ remains the Lord of the Church. It is Christ’s Church, far more profoundly than it is our Church. Our task is to remain faithful, to argue and work in Christ-like ways for the peace, unity, and purity of the Church, and to trust that through it all Christ will lead us and guide us. The rest of this article will look at two examples of lengthy conflicts from long ago: The Donatist controversy and the Arian controversy from the early centuries of Christianity. We will see that the Church fought hard battles, that the battles were on the most foundational issues imaginable, that the battles lasted not merely for years but for centuries, and that God remained the faithful shepherd of the Church throughout.

Table of Contents	
Theological Conflict: A Perspective from the Early Church.....	p. 1
Reflections on John Calvin and the Church Struggle in Geneva.....	p. 7
Time to Quit?	p. 13
Repent, Remember, Overcome	p. 14

The West: The Donatist Controversy

In the early centuries there was a great deal of unity or consensus in the Church, even if the structure of the Church's unity was less formally articulated than in a modern denomination. However, the Christians were spread across a vast area and both travel and communication were difficult. Thus conflicts that seemed worldwide to those involved were largely focused on one region or the other. The most important regional distinction was between the Latin-speaking West, centered in the ancient capital city of Rome, and the Greek-speaking East, centered in the new capital city of Constantinople.

The Donatist Controversy was primarily an issue for the Latin-speaking West. It came about in the aftermath of persecution. For the first three centuries of the Church's existence, Christians had no legal right to practice their religion. The government was sometimes suspicious of the Christians because they would not join in the worship practices of pagan Rome. The Christians seemed impious, if not outright seditious, since they would not make the required offerings to the gods or to the emperor. The Christians did little in public to clarify their stance, since worship services were held in private: even if non-Christians came to worship, they had to leave before the Lord's Supper was celebrated.¹ All of this led to distrust and suspicion of the Christians, and on many occasions there were outright persecutions. The general practice, and sometimes the formal policy of the government, was something like "don't ask, don't tell." Christians were left alone as long as they didn't go public. When Christians were publicly accused and brought before the authorities, they were told to renounce Christ and to make religious offerings to the gods or the genius of the emperor. Their calm and peace as they faced reprimand, torture, and death rather than deny their Lord bore witness to Christ's transforming power in their lives. Those who died were called "martyrs," which simply meant "witnesses."

In the middle of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, certain emperors began to crack down on the Christians in more formal and systematic ways. The important event for our story here is that in 303 the emperor Diocletian issued an edict intended to repress the Christians without resorting to bloodshed: the Churches were to be burned down and copies of the Bible were to be handed over for burning.

It was in this persecution that some of the bishops in North Africa, got into trouble.² They did not deny Christ outright, but they did hand over the Holy Scriptures for burning. Some tried to fool the police, handing over the books of heretics and other non-sacred volumes but saying that they were burning Bibles. All such acts left their status in doubt. To some this was the sin of "*traditio*" or "handing over," and those who did it became "*traditores*" "traitors" or "collaborators" who had lost all spiritual authority. After all, even if they did not openly deny

Christ, they did not act heroically like the martyrs. Their cooperation with those who would destroy the church dishonored the martyrs and seemed clearly a betrayal. Their sin placed them outside the Church, and the sacraments could only be administered within the Church. They had lost the Spirit, and could no longer administer the Sacraments which are spiritual acts.

Around 311, the Bishop of Carthage in North Africa died and a group of bishops gathered to consecrate a man named Caecilian as the new bishop. One of the bishops consecrating Caecilian was believed to have been a *traditor*. Some questioned whether a *traditor* had the spiritual authority to consecrate a bishop. Surely a bishop whose consecration was invalid could have no spiritual authority. Such a bishop was no bishop, and his sacraments, no sacraments.

A group of bishops who believed Caecilian's consecration was invalid gathered and consecrated a man named Majorinus as a rival bishop for Carthage. Thus there came to be two rival churches in North Africa, one following the bishops in the line of Caecilian, and one following the line of Majorinus and his successor Donatus. It is from Donatus that this branch of the Church came to be called "Donatists," though they just called themselves "Christians." So committed were they to their identity as the only true Church and the only bearer of valid sacraments in North Africa that when Catholics wanted to join the Donatists they had to be rebaptized.

The issue at stake seems quite legitimate to many even today. Can the Church be led effectively by people who have committed grave sins? The Donatists said "no." Does something in the work of the Church depend on the piety, the purity, of those who are ordained? The Donatists said "yes." For the Donatists, the true Church was the Church of the pure. It was found in the line of ministers who had not committed apostasy in the great persecution. This was the Church of the martyrs who lived and died in their true confession of the Lordship of Christ. It is called the *holy* Catholic Church, after all.

Caecilian's part of the Church looked at the situation differently. They, and the rest of the Western Church, emphasized that the Church is the *one holy Catholic* Church, meaning it is the unity and universality of the Church which matters. These people pointed out that it is our union with Christ that makes us holy, and not the other way around. And they pointed out that the Donatists were historically pure only of one kind of sin: apostasy in persecution. They were no cleaner than anyone else in other respects.

The Church remained divided well into the next century. Church councils ruled against the Donatists, but no reconciliation followed. The emperor Constantine tried to use force to repress the Donatists, but the movement grew. On the one hand persecution enhanced the Donatists'

view that they were the Church of the martyrs. On the other hand it resulted in violent reprisals against the Catholics by Donatist factions. No one's hands were quite clean.

When Augustine became bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa in 395, he became the chief spokesman for the Catholic party against the Donatists. Augustine argued that it is not the personal holiness of the minister that makes the Church's sacraments valid. It is Christ who in the most profound way administers the sacraments, and it is Christ who makes them valid. The minister is merely the instrument, so the minister's sins do not invalidate the sacraments. The Church is always a mixture of good people and bad, the loving and the insincere. All those in the Church have wickedness in them, and good can be found even in people who are called wicked. One cannot choose to separate one's self from the evil people in the Church; one ought instead to attend to the evil in one's heart. Certainly Augustine worked hard for the theological integrity of the Church and for the piety of both clergy and laity, and he certainly did not oppose Church discipline. However, Augustine knew that the Church is always the field full of both wheat and tares. To break the unity of the Church was far worse than holding unity with people who may be wicked:

Who therefore hates peace? The one who breaks unity. They dwell in unity if they do not hate peace. But because they were righteous they made a schism for the sake of not being mingled with the unrighteous.... The Catholic Church declares that unity must not be lost, the Church of God must not be divided. Later God will judge the good and the evil ones. If today it is impossible to separate the good from the wicked, it is necessary to tolerate this for a time.³

He summarized his message to those who would divide the Church in two pithy phrases: "Love peace, we say in our turn, love unity" and "Love peace, love Christ."⁴

Augustine argued long and hard for decades. His arguments won the day so far as the official teaching goes. He shaped the Western understanding of the nature of the Church, its ministry, and its sacraments. However, the West's attempts at reconciliation with the Donatists were marred by the use of political power and force. Augustine's arguments certainly did not bring the Donatists to reconciliation. There were still Donatist Churches in North Africa at Augustine's death in 430, over a century after the debate began. One might say that the failure of Augustine's arguments, and the inappropriate use of force, actually prove his point that the Church will always live on in a mixed state, full of both good and wicked people, with both sides always mixed in their motives. The Donatists as a separate Church disappeared during the next hundred years when North Africa was ruled by the Vandals rather than by Christian Romans. This should give us pause on two fronts. We need to learn again Augustine's lessons on the Church as

a mixed body, and not insist that we can only belong to a "pure" Church with "pure" ministers. And we need to be more godly in our methods than the authorities of Augustine's day, fighting Christian battles with Christian means rather than by force.

The East: the Arian Conflict

One of the most traumatic and dramatic theological conflicts in the Greek-speaking East was the Arian conflict. In brief, the issue was whether the Son of God, who walked the world in human flesh as Jesus Christ, was really and truly divine. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance and the difficulty of this debate in the life of the Christian Church. It was on the most essential of Christian teachings. It led to great hatred and bitterness, even the exile of great Christian leaders. It divided the Church into different parties, and led to formal divisions as well. And it lasted a long, long time. It was a conflict of such magnitude and duration that a close look may help put our current issues in perspective.

It started early in the 4th century. The Christian Church was at the end of its centuries of persecution. It was a new age for the Church, as well-educated leaders wrote about the faith in more sophisticated ways than had ever been possible before. As they read each other's works, or heard about them through the grapevine, they began to see where they disagreed, and where they believed each other's ideas were dangerous.

Around the year 319, a deacon from the Egyptian city of Alexandria named Arius began to be known for his teachings on the Son of God. He held a number of views that seemed to be well founded in Scripture and common sense. To paraphrase his teachings: There is only one God; this God has one Son; we all know that fathers are on the scene before their sons arrive; as the Arians liked to say, there was a time when the Son was not. Therefore, the Father existed before the Son existed. It is important to observe here that all of this has to do with God's eternal nature, completely apart from the incarnation of the Son as Jesus. Arius was talking about who God was before there was a world for Jesus to be born into. From all eternity there was one God, and at the very first point in creation, this God had a Son. Then, long into human history, this Son was born of Mary as Jesus of Nazareth. The Son is divine, according to Arius. But the Son is a little less divine than the Father, because the Father is the one eternal God. The Son is the very first thing that was created.

Arius and his followers drew on commonly accepted Biblical evidence for this. References to "Wisdom" in the Bible were taken as references to Christ, especially since Paul taught that Christ is the Wisdom of God.⁵ The Arians placed a lot of weight on a passage of Proverbs where Wisdom spoke in person and proclaimed "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his

acts of long ago.”⁶ So Christ himself, in his Old Testament voice, seemed to proclaim that the Son was created, a little less than God, even if much more divine than anything else in creation.

This was about the eternal nature of God, but it applied to the coming of Jesus: If the Son is created, then clearly the incarnate Son, Jesus, is subordinate to the Father. Of course Jesus is divine—just as divine as the Son of God. But since, for the Arians, the Son is not eternally divine, Jesus is not either.

Arius’ ideas made sense to many people. And he had clever ways of spreading his teachings. Apparently he put them in poetry and set them to music so that they could be sung and remembered—and we all know how the music we sing works into our memories and shapes the way we think. Clever, apparently winsome, and certainly pious, Arius’ life gave credence to his teaching.

These ideas may have seemed Biblical and sensible to Arius, but not to another Alexandrian deacon named Athanasius. Athanasius wrote a great treatise on the topic called *On the Incarnation of the Word*.⁷ Athanasius focused on the teaching of John’s Gospel where the one incarnate in Jesus is the very Word of God. The concept of the Word had important meanings to those who were trained in philosophy. The Word is not merely a message that comes out from one’s mouth. The Word is the ordering principle of creation, the very rationality of God. As God’s own rationality, the Word is not something created or something that came later than God. The Word is fully, and eternally divine and so, therefore, is Jesus.

For Athanasius this was not just abstract theory. Our very salvation hung on the issue. To paraphrase some of Athanasius’ argument: The Word is the Image of God; we were created according to the image of God, rather like a painting made from a living subject; in our sin, we have damaged the image of God—the painting is smeared and unrecognizable. Athanasius looked at the consequences of our fallen, sinful lives and saw that in this world all things tended toward destruction. Our lives go to disorder, ending in death, and we even decompose. The tendency of life in a fallen sinful world is just the opposite of God’s rational order. That is the smudge on the image. What can be done? The image needs to be restored. The true Image needs to sit before the painter again and let the Artist restore the painting. That is what happens in the incarnation: The Word who comes down is the very Image of God, and human nature is restored according to the image.

This is where the different views of Arius and Athanasius on the full eternal divinity of the Son become important. If all creation is damaged by sin, and the one who is incarnate in Jesus is created (as Arius would have it), then when the Artist restores the image, it will be still a smudged image; we will still tend all our lives toward destruction because of sin. For the image to be truly

restored, the eternally divine Word must be incarnate in Jesus, just as Athanasius taught. Only if God, the eternal God, has come to earth incarnate as Jesus, will our damaged flesh be drawn up to God, healed and restored. As Athanasius put it, God became human that we might become divine.⁸ The damage is reversed. Athanasius has a great deal to say about the cross of Christ as well, but he is adamant that the very fact of the incarnation is absolutely crucial to our salvation.

For Athanasius and his followers, if the Arians were right about Christ we are not really saved—a created Christ would have no power to save us from the destruction to which all sinful people are heading. For these people theology mattered. It is not simply an effort to be right and to prove it against all comers. One might say that they took seriously the experience and conviction that we have, in fact, received salvation, and that they proceeded to examine what the fact of that salvation implied or required to be true in the world. One might also say that they began with the record of Scripture and proceeded by examination of that record according to the philosophical categories of the fourth century. In any case, the argument was vehement because from Athanasius’ perspective, the Arians’ opinions negated our salvation. If the Church’s proclamation were to lead to faith and the salvation of the world, the Church’s teaching had to have integrity. At the very least it had to support views that, if true, would show that salvation is real and obtainable.

Now let us look at the course of the conflict and some of the things that the two sides did along the way. By doing so I hope to show that the events of today are by no means extreme. The issue came to a head in 325. The emperor Constantine was sympathetic to the Christians, if not already fully converted himself, and he called a council of bishops to settle the theological argument. This was the First Council of Nicaea, the first of the “ecumenical” or worldwide councils whose statements still have authority for most churches in the East and the West. The bishops presented their views, including examples of creeds in use in local churches at the time. They debated the issue at the heart of the matter: The relationship of the Father to the Son. They adopted positions very much in line with those of Athanasius, who was present at the council though not yet a bishop. The Father and the Son were, in the technical Greek term, “*homoousios*” or “of one substance.” The word is also translated “consubstantial.” They made a strong declaration of the point in this earliest version of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, Father, Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible,

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, begotten of the Father uniquely, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things were made, both things in heaven and those in earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, [and] became man; he

suffered and rose on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge living and dead,

And in the Holy Spirit.⁹

There was basic unanimity about God the Father, so the first clause is brief. The final clause on the Holy Spirit is even briefer, because controversy over the Spirit's divinity would not arise for some years yet. However, they could hardly be more emphatic in their assertion of the full and eternal divinity of the Son incarnate in Jesus. This is not all that they said, though. As well as this positive assertion they were bold in their negative judgment on Arius' views:

But those who say, there was once when he was not, and before he was begotten he was not and he came into being out of things that are not, or allege that the Son of God is of a different subsistence or essence, or created or alterable or changeable, the catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.¹⁰

The statement again could hardly be stronger: Arius is not named, but his views are detailed, and those who hold these views are cut off from the body of the faithful. Then, as now, Christians in conflict resorted to harsh words and harsh acts.

So far it sounds like a pretty tidy job. The conflict began around 319 and was settled by 325. The bishops of the world had made a unified statement that had the authority of the emperor behind it. Would that it were so simple.¹¹

A reality of conflict in the Church is that official decisions do not change people's hearts. People's convictions are not so loosely held that the mere fact of a decree can change their minds, even if the decree itself is wise, orthodox, and fully authoritative. What followed was a tale of ecclesiastical politics on a grand scale. Those who held Arian views continued to do so, quietly at first, while the Nicene Creed was enforced as the standard of orthodox Christianity. But then the Arians began to work their way back to prominence and power. Arius himself was allowed to receive communion by a sympathetic bishop, though Constantine then sent that bishop into exile. That bishop was Eusebius of Nicomedia, and he went to work for the Arian cause against Athanasius and others. Athanasius, since 328 the bishop of Alexandria, was no gentle pastor in opposing those judged heretical by the council. Eusebius' followers brought charges against Athanasius for the harsh way he treated his opponents. In 335 Athanasius was deposed, excommunicated, and sent into exile for this, though he was impeccably orthodox.

At emperor Constantine's death in 337, his son Constantius came to rule the eastern part of the empire. Though his father had favored the Nicene party, Constantius favored the Arian Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Eusebius became bishop of the capital, Constantinople. The conflict began to threaten the unity of the Church across the empire: the West was prone to

suspect the East of Arianism while Eusebius was in leadership, and both sides had other reasons for mistrust. Under imperial pressure for unity, the East was forced to accept Athanasius back to his role as bishop of Alexandria in 346. A few years later Constantius was sole emperor, and his close theological advisor was an Arian bishop named Valens, a staunch opponent of Athanasius. Athanasius' chief support was in the West where he had lived as an exile, but by 352 Constantius had pressured the bishops of the West to condemn him. In 356 Athanasius was ousted by the army and fled to the Egyptian desert, where he was protected by the early monks.

Clearly Arianism was now on the ascendant. The Arian views were articulated in a couple of ways. Some said that rather than being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, the Son was actually of an unlike substance (*anomoios*). More said that they were not one and the same substance, but were of a similar substance (*homoiousios*). A council in Constantinople in 360 adopted a creed that used the latter language, and the Arian side seemed to have won.

The apparent victory of the Arians spurred the Nicene party toward the finish line. Athanasius continued to write, and three younger, well-educated bishops from the region of Cappadocia carried on the work after him. These were Basil of Caesarea, Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil's friend Gregory of Nazianzus. Through their preaching, lecturing, and writing, these "Great Cappadocians" brought theological learning to a new height and gained much ground for the Nicene party.

You will have noticed that the religious party of the moment tended to be the one favored by the emperor in power. It continued to be so. After Constantius, the Church lived under a succession of emperors who were, in turn, neutral, Nicene, and Arian in their leanings. It was Theodosius I who tipped the scale for the Nicene party in a lasting way. He came to power in 379, and he came from the West. He told the Arianizing Easterners that to be recognized as an authority in the Church one had to submit to the Nicene Creed. Theodosius called another worldwide council to meet in Constantinople in 381. There the Nicene Creed was reshaped into the form it is used today in Eastern Orthodox churches—it is used in the West as well with very slight differences.

Again it seemed that the cause of Athanasius had won. This did, in fact, mark the end of Arianism as a movement with the potential to be the official doctrine of the Church as a whole. But Arian missionaries had gone out earlier in the century, and they had had much success in their work. The Goths and other tribes in the North had been converted to Christianity—but it was Arian Christianity. It was not until 496, a century after Theodosius, that the Franks were converted to the Nicene form of the faith, and from then Arianism disappeared over time.

It took 177 years—almost two centuries—if we take 319 as the beginning point and 496 as the end. At times the Nicene party seemed to have won, and at times the same could be said of the Arians. For either side to have proclaimed victory at any point along the way would have been misguided.

Was even that the end of Arianism? No, like every idea that has led to great conflict in the Church, Arianism grew from very legitimate questions and problems, and from certain points of view it made sense. The people who pushed for Arianism were neither bad people nor entirely sloppy theologians. Arianism has arisen in later generations, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries in England, and then in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Personally, I suspect that if one could survey the theological views of the people in Presbyterian pews today, we would find any number who believe that the Son of God came later in time than God the Father, that the Son is subordinate to the Father, that Jesus is more fully human than he is divine, and other views historically linked to Arianism.

Conclusion

Theological conflict has always been part of our experience as the Church. In fact one could say it is a natural result of the nature of the Church. Jesus certainly assumed that strong differences would exist in the Church, if not outright conflict. He is quite clear on this in the parable of the wheat and the tares.¹² There Jesus described the kingdom as a field in which God sowed good seed to grow good wheat. Then by night the devil sneaked in and sowed the seeds of a nasty weed. Everyone was surprised as the plants grew to find that weeds were mixed with the wheat. They were all ready to go in and pull the weeds, but the master said no, wait until the harvest. They would do more damage to the good wheat by pulling up the bad weeds than by letting both grow together.

The parable is rich with implications. First, the fact is that there are two kinds of plants in the field. It is not that both are good and useful. Rather, some are weeds and some are wheat. This is not a post-modern farm where everything that grows must be of equal value in its own right. Second, the fact that there are two kinds of plants does not mean that it is any less the Master's field. It does not even surprise the Master that these two kinds of plants are present. It is only the workers who are surprised. God knows the Church and God holds the Church's future. Third, we individual Christians seem to have two roles: On the one hand we are the laborers, and God is the Master. Our task is to humbly water the field and nurture it until harvest rather than jumping in with our self-appointed weeding program. On the other hand, we also are the plants in the field. In this role we need to give our attention to making sure that we are, in fact, living and growing as wheat, not as weeds. Whether as laborers or as wheat, we must attend to nurturing healthy faith and

Christian life. In neither case are we called upon to take individual action to divide wheat from weeds. It is in our corporate role as a Church that disciplinary action should be carried out when necessary, and even then it should be to bring about restoration of individuals to the body and for the peace and unity as well as the purity of the Church.

A major theme of Reformation theology is also important in our understanding of conflict in the Church: the doctrine of sin. In the sixteenth century John Calvin taught that sin's influence has a deep and lasting effect on each of us: "...this perversity never ceases in us, but continually bears new fruits...just as a burning furnace gives forth flame and sparks, or water ceaselessly bubbles up from a spring."¹³ It is not all bad news: Luther taught that each Christian person is "*simul justus et peccator*", or "at one and the same time righteous and a sinner."¹⁴ We are truly forgiven and made righteous in Christ. But it is not as if by finding faith we are simply made perfect. No, each of us, though forgiven by God's grace, is still broken and prone to sin to the very end of life. Each of us is always in need of forgiveness.

If all this is so, and the reformers had the strongest personal and Biblical grounds to say it is, then it has important implications for the nature of the Church. The Church is made up of individuals who are broken, prone to sin, imperfect, in need of forgiveness. This is true of each member of every local church. It is true of our moral lives and of our theological reasonings. This should lead us to approach our life together with some humility. If we are truly aware of our own sinfulness we should search out and admit our own mixed motives, and we should seek out and affirm what we can see to be good and true in our opponents' views. We should pause before we claim sole ownership of the truth, even as we work hard to argue for the truth as God has revealed it.

At the very least we Presbyterians at the beginning of the 21st century have a deep need to steep ourselves in all of Scripture and the lessons of past conflicts. We need to develop a much tougher skin for the conflicts of our present day. We have not been fighting all that long really. We have stuck together surprisingly well in a culture where Christianity is largely an individualistic thing. We need to nurture a sounder understanding of the Church as God's enterprise, Christ's body, into which we are grafted by the Spirit's power. We have no authority to divide it and we have no right to leave it.

When we see conflict arise, and when we see conflict go on for years, there is no reason for shock or surprise. We are not the first to face divisive questions—ecclesiology and christology have been fought over before. There is no reason to expect quick solutions. After all, if Arianism and Donatism took over a century to settle, and live on in the assumptions of many Christians even today, we should not think that our great dividing issues will be laid to rest in a year or by amendment of our polity.

On the other hand there is every reason to expect God to be at work in all the parties to our conflicts. Our task is to remain faithful to Christ as individuals and as churches and as presbyteries to the best of our abilities. That includes faithfully fighting it out. It is God's Church after all. It is God whom we must trust as we use our best wisdom to argue our way toward clarity.

What is not a legitimate option is to deny the parable of the wheat and the tares. Many today seem to want to live out the opposite of the parable: neither pulling weeds nor waiting for harvest, they would pull up and transplant unripe grain. Let us seek instead to live as God's people, and to nurture the fruits of the Spirit even as we debate over the long, long, haul.

¹ The Gospel was communicated, and the Church grew, through the integrity of the loving lifestyle of the Christians and through the conversations they had with their friends and acquaintances about their Lord. See Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, Joint Liturgical Studies 32 (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1995).
² For more thorough treatment of Donatism, see the articles in Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), s.v. "Donatus, Donatism," "Anti-Donatist Works," and "Church"; and Peter

Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), esp. 212-243.

³ Augustine of Hippo, "Psalm 119: The Ascents of the Christian," in *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. and intro. by Mary T. Clark, with a preface by Goulven Madec, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1984), 210-211.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:24.

⁶ Proverbs 8:22 (NRSV).

⁷ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Edward Rochie Hardie, ed., Library of Christian Classics, Ichthus Edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 55-110. The work is still read by each new generation of seminary students.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹ "The Letter of Eusebius of Caesarea Describing the Council of Nicaea" in Hardie, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, p. 338.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of the later course of the conflict see Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church in the Pelican History of the Church* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967) 133-151. The rest of this discussion is largely dependent on Chadwick's treatment.

¹² Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43.

¹³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics vol. 20 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2.1.8, p. 251.

¹⁴ See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 240-245.

Reflections on John Calvin and the Church Struggle in Geneva

By David Wright

The story of John Calvin's reforming pastorate in the small city-state of Geneva is often told in terms of unremitting factional conflict followed by a triumph for the forces of reform. His first years in the city, 1536-1538, ended in exile, when he and his fellow-pastors refused to tolerate the city council's control over contentious issues of church practice. Although Calvin returned from Strasbourg in 1541 after the Genevan authorities more or less agreed to the conditions he stipulated, this did not ensure a trouble-free resumption of his leadership of the city's Reformation. It was not until 1555 that he could count on the support of a majority of the councillors. This was indeed a critical watershed in the progress of reform as Calvin and his colleagues won at last independent church exercise of spiritual and moral discipline, free from final determination by the civil

power. Only thereafter, for less than the last decade of his life, was Calvin able to count on a largely unfettered implementation of the blueprint of a reformed church order, set out in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* drafted and approved soon after his return to Geneva in 1541.

The pattern, then, was one of lengthy struggle followed by success for the Reformers. This at any rate is how the tale has characteristically been summarized. It is writ large in what is still the most massive account of *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, seven heavyweight volumes by Émile Doumergue (1899-1927). "John Calvin: The People and Circumstances of His Time" climaxes with volume 6 entitled simply *La lutte*, "The Struggle", and volume 7, *Le triomphe*, "The Triumph". Nor is this scripting of the history of the Genevan Reformation and of Calvin's role in it without a genuine measure of justification. It was part of the genius of Calvin to secure a higher degree of reform of church

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polity and practice than was realized almost anywhere else in sixteenth-century Europe.

Yet it would be a grave mistake to suppose that Calvin passed his last years on a kind of triumphalist high. Apart from anything else, the chronicle of ill-health from which Calvin suffered most of his adult life is sufficiently daunting to fill most modern readers in the West, cosseted as we are by high-quality medical services, with a mixture of horror and amazement. This may seem an unexpected subject to introduce into this article, but none of us would dream of attempting to evaluate the career of a prominent contemporary without taking account of an almost lifelong catalogue of debilitating and even disabling afflictions.

The story is now almost definitively told by John Wilkinson in *The Medical History of the Reformers* (Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 2001), which deals also with Luther and Knox. Calvin's final years appear to have been free of the migraine attacks which began while he was a student in Paris. At Geneva they sometimes kept him in bed for days—and were treated by starvation! Chronic digestive disorder with abdominal pain and constipation, points in Wilkinson's judgement to what is now known as irritable bowel syndrome. Infective diarrhoea and roundworms were less serious than the haemorrhoids which later ulcerated and made horse-riding almost impossible. Kidney stones also caused excruciating pain in his last years, connected in turn to acute classical gout. The fits of haemoptysis—coughing up blood—which struck him in 1559 and the next years were linked to the breathlessness which increasingly restricted his activity and to the pulmonary tuberculosis identified by Beza, his colleague, successor and first biographer. Wilkinson concludes that it was the most probable cause of Calvin's death. Together with chronic malaria it explains the repeated and sometimes extended febrile illnesses which laid him low.

Such a clinical diagnosis is of interest to the history of medicine. Charles Cooke has already considered the bearing of Calvin's illnesses on Christian vocation (in *John Calvin and the Church*, ed. Timothy George, Louisville, 1990, 59-70). He stresses that these multiple ailments were more cumulative than sequential, so that "He was described several years before his death as a skeleton covered by skin" (66). Yet Calvin drove himself almost to the very end in unremitting perseverance in his vocation, preaching, writing, dictating, often being carried around, even into the pulpit. Such was the remarkable sense of commitment to the service of the Reformed gospel that kept Calvin pressing on in the face of fearful physical disability. Cooke appositely quotes from a dedication to his commentary on 2 Thessalonians: "My ministry ... is dearer to me than life" (66).

Calvin's approaching death could be foreseen months in advance, and his last letters speak of it openly. We also have a record of his farewell messages both to the city fathers of Geneva and then the following day to his

fellow-pastors, about a month before he died. Death-bed utterances no doubt vary enormously, from an unusually clear-sighted authenticity to rosy-eyed romanticism or sepulchral melancholy. Calvin's last words to the ministers contain some oft-repeated sentences, for example on his first arrival in Geneva in 1536:

When I first came to this church, I found nothing in it. There was preaching and that was all. They would look out for idols, it is true, and burned them, but there was no reformation. Everything was in disorder.

As his mind turned over the years in Geneva, he reflected on his return from Strasbourg after exile. "I would never accept the ministry until [the city council] had taken an oath respecting these two points: namely, to preserve the catechism and discipline"—that is, the confessional basis and the ordered polity of the church, laid down in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. Yet, although these two fundamentals had indeed been preserved, Calvin's farewell address breathes no note of satisfied achievement. "All I have done has been worth nothing. The ungodly will greedily seize upon this word, but I say it again that all I have done has been worth nothing, and I am a miserable creature."

Well, we may beg to differ! Calvin was indeed confident enough to claim one achievement: "though I am nothing, yet know I well that I have prevented three thousand tumults that would have broken out in Geneva." He is conscious of having "lived here amid continual bickerings." Even after his recall "I had no less trouble when I wished to discharge my duty than heretofore." And so he warns those who will carry the torch after him:

Thus I have been amid combats, and you will experience that there will be others not less but greater. You [Genevans] are a perverse and unhappy people, and though there are good folk in it the people is perverse and wicked, and you will have troubles when God shall have called me away.

To the very end, Calvin remained acutely conscious of the fractious course of events in Geneva. He departed not in splendid triumph nor in the warm glow of sunset, but with a sharp awareness that the conflict would survive him, and might thereafter intensify. This was a note that Calvin sounded repeatedly in writings of his middle and latter years in Geneva. It was by no means the unwarrantably bleak perspective of a human spirit approaching the death-pangs of his decrepit body.

In his lectures on the Minor Prophets, published in 1559, the beginning of Zephaniah prompted Calvin to comment on the reforming king Josiah.

Although Josiah made use of all means to revive the true and unadulterated worship of God in Judea, yet he did not attain his objective. We clearly learn how hard were the trials he sustained, since he effected nothing, though at great hazard he attempted to restore the worship of God. When he found that his efforts were in vain, he no doubt had to contend with great

difficulties, and this we know by our own experience. When hope of success shines on us, we easily surmount all troubles, however arduous our work may be. But when we realize that we are striving in vain, we become dejected, and when we see that our efforts succeed only for a few years, our spirit grows faint. Josiah overcame both these difficulties.

Josiah's example can be directly applied to the present day, when "God now appears to the world in the full light" of the gospel.

Yet very few there are who submit themselves to his Word, and of this small number fewer still there are who sincerely and without any dissimulation embrace sound doctrine Since then the perversity of the world is great enough to depress the minds of God's servants a hundred times, let us learn to look to Josiah, who ... when he saw that he was achieving little or nothing, still persevered and with firm and invincible strength of mind, persisted in his course.

It is a mistake, says Calvin, to regard ours as a golden age simply because a proportion of the population profess the true worship of God. Too many treat almost like angels any whose words attest their acceptance of the gospel.

The sacred name of Reformation is at this time profaned when anyone who indicates merely by a nod of the head that he is not wholly an enemy of the gospel is immediately hailed as a person of extraordinary piety.

Among the crowds who evince some regard for religion are hidden numerous hypocrites. There is indeed much chaff mixed with the wheat.

How difficult it is to restore the world to the obedience of God, and totally to eradicate all corruptions, even though idols are removed and superstitious practices abolished.

Yet Josiah stuck to his last, and carried on undaunted.

Later on in this series of lectures, the opening verses of the prophecy of Haggai evoked a similar reflection from Calvin. The people were saying that it was not yet time to rebuild the house of the Lord—while they enjoyed living in their fine panelled houses. They failed even to erect a tent for God, content to sacrifice to him in the open air.

What is the situation at the present time? We see that through a remarkable miracle of God the gospel has shone forth in our day, and we have emerged, as it were, from the nether world. Yet who now of his own free will erects an altar to God? On the contrary, all are concerned only for their own advantage, and while they are taken up with their own interests, the worship of God is cast aside. There is no care, no zeal, no concern for it. What is worse, many are profiting from the gospel, as though it were a lucrative business.

It was the kindly providence of God that Haggai's rebuke should be preserved, so that he might be a preacher to

Calvin's generation also, "to reprove our torpor and ungrateful indifference. The building of the spiritual temple is deferred whenever we become devoted to ourselves."

Ten years earlier, in his lecture-based commentary on Isaiah 8:14-15, Calvin includes the Protestant communities in his verdict that "in the whole Christian world the state of religion has almost collapsed Even among those who have had the pure service of God restored to them, very few embrace the gospel of God with integrity." And yet Calvin was not tempted to throw in the towel and revert to the quiet life of the scholar, which had been his original avocation and for which to the end he believed himself temperamentally suited.

The tortured personal struggles that fidelity to his Genevan calling entailed for Calvin are nowhere more evident than in the extensive correspondence of the years of exile about the possibility of his return to the city. To take the full measure of these exchanges it is essential for readers to bracket off modern assumptions about the easy mobility—translatability—of ministers from congregation to congregation, let alone from one ordered church system to another. The use of "denomination" in this context would be wildly anachronistic, and the setting up of new churches on a "free" or independent model was the province of the Radicals of the Reformation movement. For Calvin it was a question of the reformed and reforming church catholic of Geneva—the old Roman Catholic Church in the city under new ownership, we might say—or nothing.

The question of returning to Geneva raised itself almost immediately after Calvin and Guillaume Farel had shaken the dust of the city off their feet in late April 1538. Apart from anything else, the other Swiss Reformed churches, especially Zurich under Heinrich Bullinger, were rapidly on to the diplomacy to ensure their recall. Calvin was not slow to expose his own sentiments, ten weeks after leaving Geneva.

On looking back and considering the perplexities which surrounded me from the time when I first went there, I dread nothing more than returning to the charge from which I have been released. For when I first entered upon it I could discern the calling of God which held me fast bound and consoled me, but now on the contrary I am fearful of tempting him if I resume so great a burden which has already been felt to be insupportable.

He is aware that in their absence the exiles' reputation is being torn to pieces at Geneva. Calvin's comment reveals a great deal about his stance throughout the many months ahead.

If we know that they cannot calumniate us except in so far as God permits, we also know the goal God has in view in granting such permission. Let us humble ourselves, therefore, unless we wish to

strive with God when he would humble us. Meanwhile, let us wait upon God.

After settling in Strasbourg in September 1538, Calvin discusses in a letter to Farel, now ministering in Neuchatel, the apportionment of blame for the breach in Geneva. One of the city leaders had proposed that an apology from Calvin and Farel would smooth the path to reconciliation.

We willingly acknowledge before God and all the faithful that our unskilfulness, and our carelessness, deserved to be chastised by an example of this kind. But I will never admit that that unhappy church fell into such utter disorder through our fault. We know in ourselves that it is far otherwise in the sight of God.

In any case, if they took the proposed route back into the Genevans' good books, everyone would immediately hold them up to scorn—"These pastors will stick at nothing to get their jobs back!" Calvin soon sent the church of Geneva a long pastoral letter, partly of consolation, partly of reassurance that, although the Genevans' own faults had incurred this divine scourging, God would grant an outcome that served their salvation.

Fresh endeavours rapidly consumed Calvin's energies at Strasbourg, but he found time to respond to an enquiry whether Genevan believers should receive the Lord's supper from the pastors imposed in the exiles' place. Calvin reported what he had agreed in discussion with Wolfgang Capito, one of Strasbourg's ministers.

Among Christians there ought to be so great a dislike of schism that they may always avoid it so far as lies in their power Whenever therefore it happens, by the Lord's permission, that the Church is administered by [ministers of the word and sacraments], whatever kind of persons they may be, if we see there the marks of church, it will be better not to break the unity. Nor need it be any hindrance that some points of doctrine are not quite so pure, since there is scarcely any church which does not retain some remnants of former ignorance. It is sufficient for us if the doctrine on which the church of God is founded be recognized, and maintain its place.

In June 1539 Calvin addressed another long letter to the Genevan church, which again revealed how theology, that is, an ordered understanding of the ways of God with his people, determined his counsel.

Although that change which took place upon our departure may have been brought about by the subtlety of the devil, so that whatever followed that change may justifiably be suspected by you, nevertheless in it the remarkable grace of the Lord is to be acknowledged by you. He has not left you altogether destitute, nor let you fall back again under the yoke of antichrist (i.e. Rome), from which he has once rescued you already. Instead he wished both that the doctrine of the gospel should still exist and that some appearance of a church should flourish among you, so

that with a quiet conscience you might continue there. We have always admonished you to acknowledge that overturning of your church as the visitation of the Lord sent upon you, and necessary for us also. Nor should you direct your thoughts so much against corrupt people and Satan's instruments as toward personal and individual sins, which have deserved no lighter punishment, but indeed a more severe chastisement.

The impressive attempt to woo the Genevans back to the Roman allegiance by Jacopo Sadoletto, the reform-minded bishop of Carpentras, elicited from Calvin on Geneva's behalf one of the most admirable fruits of his evangelical theological genius. In the same autumn of 1539, the tergiversations of Pierre Caroli, now recommended by Farel, no less, to Calvin's renewed favour, induced in Calvin such paroxysms of rage that he could not trust himself in polite company.

More hopeful news in the spring of 1540 that the Genevans had resolved to put a stop to their internal wrangling brought Calvin face to face with the issue of return. "They have begun to be curable, even though not yet fully restored to health." As for the contested ministers, "I do not care by whom the work of the Lord is carried forward, provided that it is well done." As for Calvin himself, "I am horrified at the mere mention of a recall The farther I proceed the more distinctly I perceive out of what a whirlpool of danger the Lord has delivered me." Calvin smiled when Pierre Viret recommended Geneva on health grounds. Why not the cross instead, for "it would have been far preferable to perish once for all than be tormented in that place of torture."

By the autumn of 1540, following the emergence of new city officers in Geneva, Calvin confronted a formal invitation to return. He protests his regard and concern for the Genevan church, "such that I would never be wanting in her time of need to do whatsoever I could to help her." But he is in "singular perplexity," on the one hand desirous of meeting the Genevans' wishes and of "wrestling with all the grace that God has given me to bring their church back to a better condition," but on the other hand committed to a charge in Strasbourg—and about to accompany Bucer and others to a colloquy of wide-reaching significance with Catholics at Worms. He is consulting with the chief pastors of Strasbourg. To Farel he expressed his mind in much starker terms and greater length.

Whenever I call to mind the wretched state in which my life was spent when there, how can my very soul avoid shuddering when any proposal is made for my return? I know indeed by experience that wherever I turn, all sorts of annoyances are thrown in my way, that if I would live to Christ, this world must be to me a scene of trial and vexation, for the present life is appointed as a field of conflict. But at the same time

... pardon me if I dread *that* place as having about it somewhat of a fatality in my case.

While still in Geneva, bound hand and foot, he preferred to suffer to the uttermost extremity rather than entertain thoughts of moving elsewhere. But once delivered thence by the favour of God, who would not excuse his reluctance to plunge again into that gulf and whirlpool which he had found so destructive? Weighing with him was the consideration Farel had mentioned that

the battle which I shall have to fight will be altogether tougher and more difficult with my colleagues than with those outside.

The peaceful pastorate of Strasbourg, serving the self-selected refugees of the French congregation and teaching the highly motivated students in the college, had slackened his zeal and skills for dealing with the mixed multitude of Geneva.

“Yet all of these considerations are of no avail to prevent my acquiescence in the call. The more I feel disposed to turn away with abhorrence from that sphere of labour, the more inclined I am on that very account to suspect myself.” So Calvin will hand the matter over to trusty guides and friends, which meant first and foremost Martin Bucer and other Strasbourg preachers. He told the Genevan senate in November 1540 that, although in the special love which he bore to their church he was ever obliged to seek her welfare and prosperity, he was not free to leave his present responsibilities in Strasbourg, nor could he say when he would be, because the decision was not his. Meanwhile, from a distance he was ready to assist Geneva in any way he could. Participation in the series of colloquies with reformist Catholics in Germany, which reached its climax at Regensburg in the spring of 1541, provided Calvin with sufficient grounds to keep the Genevan representations at bay. In the meantime, to Viret he poured out all the dreads and forebodings that the prospect of a resumption of ministry at Geneva summoned up. Viret was urging a speedy return. “The more experience I have, the more clearly I realize how arduous a charge it is to rule in the superintendence of a church.” Calvin protests his disinterestedness; he is not flinching from the call but only consulting the best way forward for the Genevans. By his hasty action they would not want to risk a second disruption.

By May 1541, while still at Regensburg, Calvin is committed to returning to Geneva, but the timing is still to be resolved. He ran through the whole saga in a long letter to the pastors of Zurich. They would not credit it were he to relate to them a tiny part of the miseries he had had to endure for a whole year in Geneva. “Not a day passed in which I did not ten times over long for death.” But he did not dwell on the circumstances which stood in the way of his return—“the ignominy to which I was subjected, the savage treatment, and the like.” But return he did, being back in Geneva in mid-September.

It is time to venture some reflections on Calvin’s career-long participation in the church struggle in Geneva. History cannot dictate to us, not even church history, but it can instruct us by its example. North America, and the West as a whole, in the twenty-first century is a far cry from the small city-state of sixteenth-century Europe. Nor is John Calvin as widely appreciated, nor for that matter as widely known, as used to be the case in the Reformed family of churches. Those who are not ashamed to be known as Calvinists are bound to be selective in the aspects of his theology, exegesis and activity which they sign up to.

Yet all of us who stand unashamedly in the Reformed tradition of Christianity cannot escape major indebtedness to the achievement of Calvin. The Reformed tradition has other roots than Geneva, to be sure—Zurich in particular, and Basel and Strasbourg, and secondary channels such as France and of course Scotland. Yet the place of Calvin’s Geneva as the mother-church of the Reformed world is secure, and it is impossible to evade the extraordinary contribution of Calvin himself. That contribution was made at enormous personal cost—that much should be inescapably clear from this article. Part of the hardship is attributable to the limitations of medical knowledge and of other dimensions of urban existence in early modern Europe. Other facets of his experience have a more perennial ring about them. Can it plausibly be maintained, for example, that at the outset of the third Christian millennium we are any better at conflict resolution than Calvin’s generation? Not so, to judge by the number of Presbyterian churches in Reformed strongholds like Scotland, the USA and Korea.

Where Calvin’s example powerfully instructs us is first in the rigour of his sacrifice and obedience. As he prepared to leave Strasbourg to travel back to Geneva he wrote to his closest confidant, Farel, “When I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord.” “I am not my own”—the phrase recalls that wonderful section in *Institutes* 3:7, entitled “The Sum of the Christian Life: the Denial of Ourselves,” through which “We are not our own” runs like a key refrain. It is worth remembering, in an age when questions of vocation often get submerged in the muddy waters of self-fulfilment and self-expression, that Calvin’s preferred way of life might well have looked more like the Erasmian than the Lutheran model. We might judge that his most lasting accomplishment proved to lie in the realm of Christian scholarship, biblical and theological, but it would be a gross misjudgement to imagine that, without the stormy and demanding Genevan pastorate, the biblical commentaries and the *Institutes* would have been just the same.

It was the peculiar genius of Calvin to transcribe his biblical and theological understanding into an ordered church life—which was more extensive than church order precisely understood. We must go further and talk about an ordered Christian society also. In both church and

society praxis, in the sense of practice informed by theory, that is, theology, and of theological reflection on practice, holds its importance for Reformed Christianity to a major extent because Calvin, to a greater degree than any other sixteenth-century Reformer, successfully enacted the Reformation in Geneva. Why did the city elicit John Knox's eulogy as "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the apostles"? It was not the rediscovered gospel, for "In other places, I confess Christ to be truly preached. But manners and religion so sincerely reformed I have not yet seen in any other place." And this on the human level has to be ascribed to a man driven by a commanding sense of vocation which he never sought or dreamed of but whose inexorable demands he refused to evade, even from the congenial pastures of Strasbourg. His was a life of good, old-fashioned personal sacrifice. My student generation was reared on heroic exemplars like C.T. Studd (1862-1931), one of the famous "Cambridge Seven" and pioneer missionary to China and Central Africa. His most famous statement was: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him."

This oft-quoted utterance is an apt transition to the second main aspect in which we may be instructed by Calvin's example—the theological control of human and churchly experience. Not every element in Calvin's constructive theology may satisfy a stringent biblical critique, but at least he teaches us by his refusal to read the world, humanity and the church except in terms of God's purposes. His was an irreducibly theological mind, and his world was one in which God was forever doing all manner of things. He thus presents a fundamentally important corrective to much of the broad mainstream of the old denominations in the West, and perhaps also to segments of established evangelicalism, for which God does very little in the world today. The reigning theological ethos is pervasively Deist. God does nothing through preaching, he does not answer prayer, he never acts in judgement. We conduct our church assemblies and committees with a perfunctory initial prayer and perhaps a closing benediction but these tell one very little about the expectations and the basic instinctive convictions of what happens in between. God converts no one, and we would not be so simple as to believe that he heals anyone. God is not to be feared, we need not worry about impugning his honour, nor whether our worship conforms to his will and pleases him. He has nothing to do with any of the adversities of life. He does not chastise, rebuke, humble, afflict, raise up or cast down. (How do we sing the Magnificat?) When Calvin comments on his crippling gout, "God has bound my feet fast with fetters," we smile indulgently.

A church whose preachers and teachers fail to help Christian people to interpret their life and their world theologically—which means also of course Christologically and pneumatologically—is aiding and abetting radical secularisation. It is not for me from distant Scotland to venture to speak to North America under the shadow of September 11, 2001—and perhaps speechlessness is the only appropriate response. But dare we say nothing about God in it all? Perhaps we need to turn to the imprecatory Psalms, which are distinguished by their resort exclusively to divine and not human action.

John Calvin had clear theological markers by which to steer through the disordered church life of Geneva. They helped him to face up to the insistent summons of his interrupted calling to minister to the gospel there, in a place of such fearful memories. They also helped him to be more generous about the ministry of others than some of his brethren were inclined to be. They represented, of course, some prioritising between first-order and second-order issues, and in their focus on the declaration of the gospel and the two sacraments of the gospel they could tolerate but not condone some corruption of discipline, which Calvin persistently refused to make a third mark of the church. One sharp difference between the churches of the Reformation and of today lies in the plethora of para-church bodies in which it is possible for so much of Christians' time and energies to be spent. This latitude can scarcely avoid a devaluation of church. In Geneva all communal Christian activity was encompassed in the church itself.

Finally, Calvin's theology could cope with the exceeding deviousness and perversity of humanity, individually and in the mass. I am not aware if anyone has studied the place of the devil and Satan in Calvin's works. Mentions occur in the letters quoted earlier in this piece, but it is my impression that Calvin generally fastens not on diabolical agency but on the inscrutably manifold complex of evil that is the human heart and mind and will. It is generally said that it was the horrific carnage of World War I which sounded the death-knell of optimistic liberalism in the first half of the twentieth century. Dare I ask what impact September 11, 2001, might have on theological anthropology? The church of course is part of humanity. Calvin at least knew that only a realistic doctrine of human sinfulness enabled one to make theological sense of the Genevan church struggle.

One brief tailpiece: for Calvin this earthly life was not the whole story. He seems to have assumed it would always be a theatre of conflict. He could no more escape it than he could opt out of human and churchly life altogether.

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Time to Quit?

A Reflection on Perseverance

by Roberta Hestenes

In recent gatherings of clergy and lay leaders concerned about years of difficult and painful denominational debates and quarrels threatening the peace, purity and unity of the Church, a new, albeit also ancient, lament can often be heard. In the words of the Psalmist, the lament goes “How long, O Lord, how long?” On the lips of some Christians today the lament often takes the form of frustration, irritation and even anger that conflicts and controversies continue year after year with no definitive end clearly in sight. One pastor put it this way: “I’m sick and tired of having to deal with these issues year after year. Either they go away or I will go away.”

This desire to withdraw from persistent struggles and seek greener pastures, with no irksome controversies or votes, is understandably tempting. We have important positive work to do in sharing the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. Must we be distracted by protracted denominational disagreements about ordination standards and sexual behavior? Why should we bother with those, even those who name the name of Christ as we do, who advocate views which we passionately believe are not true to Scripture? To put it bluntly, some ask: Isn’t 20 years long enough? Isn’t it time to quit?

After these twenty years of being personally involved in what some call “the sexuality wars,” I know the feeling. While there may be some who are energized by repeated calls to battle, I suspect that I am not the only one who, at least sometimes, finds these conflicts debilitating and discouraging.

But I had the privilege recently of ministry with World Vision in Cambodia which gave me a fresh perspective on the church in the U.S.

The first day I arrived in Cambodia I was given the obligatory tour of the “killing fields” and of the notorious Toul Sleng prison where the piles of skulls and bones along with instruments of torture remain as a horrifying reminder of the Pol Pot reign of terror and the approximately 2 million men, women and children who perished. In the terrible years of systematic genocide with the resulting hunger, famine and destruction, the small

community of Christians in Cambodia experienced great suffering. One estimation is that more than 8000 Christians and 27 out of 33 pastors/Christian leaders were martyred through starvation or brutality. Even when the Pol Pot regime was finally overthrown by the Vietnamese, conditions improved only slightly and very slowly. Thousands lived for years in refugee camps in Thailand cut off from home and family. During my time in Cambodia, I heard numerous stories of surviving Christians who had lost dozens of family members, many who had endured barbarities beyond belief and yet who continued courageously faithful to Jesus Christ through it all. They didn’t give up; they persevered, clinging to Jesus and trusting God. They often prayed through tears. Where they saw no human hope, they turned all the more to God for strength and help.

It was a long, terrible time, and yet ... whether in the camps, in exile or in the underground Church, most remaining Christians were faithful and God was at work. The power of their witness to Christ is staggering. The Gospel was shared, churches were planted and thousands came to faith while in the refugee camps. New leaders emerged and were disciplined. House churches continued to meet in secret to worship and witness to the mercy and grace of God. New believers joined them. When, in the 1990s, the Church could function more openly, the seeds of rebirth and renewal began to grow. Today there are almost 1000 Cambodian churches and more than 60,000 adult believers. Life in Cambodia is still difficult with new challenges like HIV/AIDS and much corruption. The Church faces the challenge of discipling large numbers of new believers with few resources. There are too few jobs and too much poverty. But the Church is vital, alive and growing.

I was humbled and challenged by my time with these Christians, by their smiles, their suffering, their dedication and their joy in Christ. I’m encouraged that they didn’t and don’t give up. Many who had been forced to flee in exile to more comfortable communities overseas returned to minister in the difficult circumstances of their homeland. Soon after my return, I read these words in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews:

Let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterward Think

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about all he endured when sinful people did such terrible things to him, so that you don't become weary and give up. After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin. (Hebrews 12:2-4, NLT)

In our struggles in the American church, I find it helpful to gain perspective and patience by focusing on two things—both suggested in the 12th chapter of Hebrews. The first is to stay focused and centered in Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. This does not eliminate problems but it does set them in the proper context and proportion, balanced out by the “eternal weight of glory” in Christ. Christ does rule and will rule; we can follow him with patience. He has been there before us and walks with us now. The Church is not ours but his. He has promised that it will not be conquered by evil. This truth should not inspire passivity but confidence!

The second reminder is to remember that we carry on in presence of a “great cloud of witnesses.” I believe that these witnesses include not only the saints of old, but also those faithful Christians of Cambodia and throughout the world. Our struggles pale compared with others. The US church is not the only nor the whole of the Christian

community. The issues we face are serious but not impossible. We need to get a grip and stand strong.

It is my conviction that faithfulness to Christ calls us to persevere in the situation where He has placed us unless or until we are given very clear permission to move. Impatience or dislike of conflict are not reason enough to withdraw or quit. As long as we have freedom and opportunity to declare the Gospel of Jesus Christ, calling people to saving faith and a holy life, we should not abandon our vows and give up. No foot soldier picks the place where they will serve; only the generals do that, presumably because they see the bigger picture. Jesus Christ is far superior to all forces and powers and knows the future for his Church in ways that we cannot. His weapons are the weapons of love and righteousness, not of withdrawal or force. By the work of His Spirit, we receive the gifts we need to make our contribution, in the place where he assigns us. Standing for the truths of Scripture is not a distraction but a responsibility and an opportunity. Proclaiming and demonstrating the power of the Gospel to transform all of human life is an awesome privilege. With patience and perseverance, we can bear faithful witness where God calls us.

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Repent, Remember, Overcome: A Proposal to Renew the Church

By Susan Cyre and Terry Schlossberg

Voting is underway on another Amendment to the Constitution dealing with sexuality, for the fourth time in five years. Presbyterians are weary of the controversy. There is no illusion that defeating this amendment will settle this issue for the church. Presbyterians expect advocacy for the ordination of those engaged in homosexual behavior, and acts of defiant disobedience, to continue. Some Presbyterians are discussing whether it is time to withdraw and form another denomination. They question whether it is good stewardship to continue to use time, resources and energy to fight a battle that seems endless, impossible to win and which appears to hinder the goals of mission and evangelism.

In this series of articles we will argue that the confrontation between the church and the prevailing spirit of the age is basic to the church's mission and that the

current conflict has historical precedent throughout Scripture. We will also argue that those who declare that we cannot continue to tolerate “the same old-same old” business as usual are correct. We will probe Scripture for a vision of a renewed church and our role in it. And, in coming issues of *Theology Matters*, we will start a discussion of effective steps we can take toward the reform and renewal of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The Current State of the Church

Some people today inside and outside the church are labeling the entire Presbyterian Church (USA) apostate. Rather than using such a broad sweeping label, let us look at some specifics.

Three hundred and seventeen commissioners to the 2001 General Assembly out of a denomination of 2.5 million

members approved Amendment A. If an additional fifty-five commissioners had voted against Amendment A, it would have been defeated and not sent down to the presbyteries for their vote. Those few GA commissioners do not represent the faith and commitment of the entire denomination.

The three hundred and seventeen commissioners to the 2001 General Assembly that supported Amendment A were elected by their presbyteries. Since in 1996 a majority of presbyteries voted to add the fidelity and chastity ordination standards to the *Book of Order*, it is clear that many of the commissioners to the 2001 General Assembly did not reflect the views of the presbyteries that sent them.

It seems evident then that the general state of the church is one that affirms our current ordination standards but is careless in electing commissioners to the General Assembly.

We know that the General Assembly Council (GAC) has on important occasions failed to hold its program agencies accountable to the church's doctrinal standards. The GAC failed in 1994 to denounce the theologies of the Re-Imagining Conference and it failed in 2001 to reject entirely the theologies of the Peacemaking Conference. The ninety-two people on the GAC are nominated by the GA Nominating Committee and elected by GA commissioners sent by presbyteries.

Members of the GA Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC), which is our highest church court, are nominated by the GA Nominating Committee (GANC) and elected by GA commissioners. Their rulings in several recent ordination cases have contributed directly to the conflict in our denomination. In response to these PJC actions, presbyteries have attempted to restrain the court by sending overtures to the GA to amend our Constitution.

A majority of the 2.5 million Presbyterians hold biblical views consistent with our constitution and are not represented by the decisions of this small number of people in leadership. An August 2000 Presbyterian Panel survey shows that seventy-two percent of Presbyterians reject homosexual behavior as an acceptable lifestyle. A majority of presbyteries—fifty-seven percent—hold biblical views on sexuality, reflected in their votes on previous amendments. A handful of people who oppose biblical standards and the votes of lower governing bodies have been elected to positions of leadership and exert great influence in our denomination.

Our Constitution: Guidance for the Way Forward

Constitutionally, the PCUSA remains strong. The Presbyterian Constitution, which includes both the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*, presents a clear biblical witness that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully

man, and is the only Savior of the world and Lord of all. (For example see the Heidelberg Catechism, 4.016, 4.017, 4.029, 4.030, Westminster Confession of Faith 6.044, 6.056).

The Constitution in both the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* presents a clear biblical witness on issues of morality. The binding document that defines us as a people is faithful to Scripture. Our *Book of Order* says of the Confessions,

In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation.... The church is prepared to counsel with or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. (G-2.0200)

The reform of the church has been advancing over the past several decades. Since 1978 the church has repeatedly been asked whether Scripture can be interpreted to affirm the ordination of those who engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage. Each time the church has said that Scripture is clear that God's will and intent is for sexual relations to be expressed only within marriage. The church's position has not changed despite pressure to do so from a vocal minority.

In another area of morality, the General Assembly in 1997 passed a resolution condemning partial birth abortion. The General Assembly in 1998 restructured the denomination's compulsory medical plan so that churches can choose not to use their medical dues to pay for abortions, and instead have their dues cover medical expenses for adopted newborns.

The women's groups in the denomination which were so effective in promoting radical feminism up to 1993's Re-Imagining Conference have been much less effective in recent years. Women's Ministry Area director, Mary Elva Smith, was quoted in PCUSA News saying that she "doesn't want to allow the continuing backlash to the legendarily controversial re-imagining God conference of 1993 to continue silencing feminist theologians in the denomination." The GAC was instructed by the GA in 1998 to rewrite the sexuality curriculum to conform to biblical standards.

Over the last several decades there has been movement toward reform in critical areas where the Church is significantly acculturated. Russ Stevenson, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Baton Rouge, LA, observed at a meeting in Denver in July, 2001, "that the denomination is more evangelical now than it has been at any time in the last 40 years of my ministry."

The hard work of reform in the church is certainly not complete. However, if we are blind to the fruit of God's faithful reforming activity among us, then we deny the praise that is due him and the encouragement he offers us.

The Nature of the Church

Scripture does not support the notion that the church can be without sin and free of controversy. Assaults on the truth begin in the earliest biblical records of the church. Scripture is replete with occasions when the people of God forsook the true God and worshiped idols. The accounts of Moses and the golden calf, of Ezra and Nehemiah's rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple, of Josiah's reinstitution of right worship, and of Paul's warnings to the churches of the New Testament, teach us that the long history of the church has been one of falling into the worst forms of sins against God, and God's faithfulness to restore his truth among his people from generation to generation. Paul's final words to the leaders of the church at Ephesus were, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock," "to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.... Therefore be on the alert...." (Acts 20:28-31).

Our Confessions also remind us that the gospel will be attacked. The Second Helvetic Confession teaches, "there have at times been great contentions in the Church, and the most excellent teachers of the Church have differed among themselves about important matters without meanwhile the Church ceasing to be the Church because of these contentions. For thus it pleases God to use the dissensions that arise in the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest." (1Cor 11:19) [5.133]

The apostle Peter looked back at the state of the church in the Old Testament and looked forward to the controversies that he knew lay ahead for the church when he wrote, "As there were false prophets among the ancient folks, so also among you there will be false teachers, secretly bringing in destructive heresies" (2 Pet 2:1). Calvin, reflecting on the passage's meaning for the church of his day, wrote, "Do you see how he predicts that danger threatens, not from the common people, but from

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view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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those who boast the title of teachers and pastors. Moreover, how often did Christ and his apostles foretell that pastors would pose the greatest dangers to the church?" (*Institutes* VI,18,4)

We, in our day, are proving again the truth of the Bible's teaching that the real threat to the church has always come from inside the church: from leaders and pastors, from false prophets and teachers—that is the church's history throughout the Old Testament, into the New Testament, and up to our own time. Jesus cautioned against utopian notions of church purity when he taught his disciples that there would be wheat and tares growing together in the church until he returned.

Calvin describes the state of the church at the Second Council of Ephesus, "where Eutyches' heresy prevailed and Flavian, with some other godly men, was cast into exile and many misdeeds of this sort committed." Then he concludes, "I am quite convinced that truth does not die in the church, even though it be oppressed by one council, but is wonderfully preserved by the Lord so that it may rise up and triumph again in its own time." (*Institutes*, IV,18,13)

Satan's primary target is the church because, as Paul wrote to Timothy, it is "the pillar and support of the truth." Its head is the One who is the Truth. If Satan can destroy the church, he has destroyed the truth and the father of lies wins. But Christ promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

Scripture is a record of the clash of two kingdoms that culminated on Good Friday when it appeared for a time that the kingdom of Satan had defeated the Kingdom of God. We misunderstand the extent of spiritual warfare when we see our current situation as abnormal and seek to flee from it. Our generation's sexuality struggle is only the current manifestation of Satan's attack on truth that has occurred throughout history and will continue until Christ returns.

While we do not seek these controversies, we also cannot shrink back from them as if they are abnormal. They should not weary us for they are the natural outcome of the kingdom of God challenging the kingdom of this world. And God's Word tells us that God allows these controversies in order that the truth might be made manifest and his name glorified.

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