ABSTRACT

John Calvin’s criticisms of the Roman Papacy, which take place in the context of his overall ecclesiology, are basically correct. Calvin’s view of the marks of the church provides us a dynamic conception of the body of Christ as a creation of the Spirit of the ascended Lord. In the context of his polemic with Rome, we examine his ecclesiology, especially his conception of the ministry, the marks, ecclesial doctrine and jurisdiction. We show that with respect to the apostolate and the subsequent ministry of the church, as well as the keys and marks of the church, Calvin’s arguments can be greatly strengthened by a full appreciation of the ascension of Jesus Christ and the eschatological situation created thereby. We seek thus to extend Calvin’s views of the church and the ministry of the Spirit in a fully temporal direction which takes into account the eschatological “already not yet” tension. We apply these insights specifically to the claims of the Roman papacy.
To Cheryl
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The Roman Catholic doctrine of the papacy is of enormous theological import. This vexed question is the great differentiator and the great stumbling block in Roman ecclesiology. All ecumenical discussion faces it as a Goliath taunting a divided Christendom. While neither the Lutheran nor the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation considered the papacy per se as the decisive issue,\(^1\) nevertheless all the issues between the parties are at stake here. The Roman doctrine of the papacy makes a distinct and exclusive claim for the form of the church which, if true, precludes the validity of Protestant orders and the full ecclesial status of Protestant communions. In addition, in light of the prerogatives Rome attaches to the papal office, this question has a certain epistemological primacy. If the Roman claim is true, all the doctrines defined by the Roman See are, *ipso facto*, true and irreformable. Thus, for example, if Rome is right about the papacy, the Reformation is wrong about justification. In addition, there is a certain existential importance to this question since nearly all of the many evangelical converts to Rome cite something like the authority of the Catholic Church or the Petrine ministry as crucial reasons for their decisions.

Matters are complicated for, apart from questions of historical development, the doctrine of the Petrine ministry\(^2\) is embedded within a constellation of other theological

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\(^1\) This, of course, does not mean, as we shall see in the case of Calvin, that there was not virulent criticism.

\(^2\) I use “Petrine Ministry” generally as a synonym for the ministry of the Roman papacy. Where it refers to the ministry of the apostle Peter himself the context should make that clear.
themes. At the center of the papal dogma there is the issue of the keys of the kingdom promised to Peter in Mt. 16:17. This cannot be assessed, however, without discussing apostolic authority in general, as well as how the powers given to Peter relate to those possessed by the other members of the apostolic college. Finally, these questions need to be properly situated in redemptive history and in an overall ecclesiology which takes full account of the New Testament teaching.

Our intention in this paper shall be to expound and evaluate John Calvin’s critique of the Petrine ministry in light of its historical background. In addition to material dealing directly with the Papacy, our task will require us to engage Calvin’s doctrine of ecclesiastical power, both doctrinal and disciplinary, in the context of his broader ecclesiology. In particular, we will be concerned with the apostolate, the ministry, the keys and the marks of the church. We shall do this primarily by using the doctrine of the church laid out in Book Four of the Institutes. We will supplement this analysis with material from Calvin’s commentaries and polemical works.

Having done this we will then examine Calvin’s position as to its effectiveness in light of the Roman doctrine. Our thesis is that Calvin, in tying the power of the keys to the Word, and then contending exegetically that Rome has corrupted the Word, is fundamentally correct. To buttress his thesis he engages in a number of helpful and insightful pieces of exegesis. In addition, his historical and moral arguments against the papacy are effective. His basic critique is still relevant and powerful.

Nevertheless, it is not without its weaknesses. We can think of Calvin’s criticism as falling into three categories which, of course, overlap. First, there is the historical criticism of the Roman government. While this was and is necessary, and shows forth Calvin’s considerable skills as a student of the Fathers, our contemporary experience shows that arguments from history can cut both ways. Indeed, it is precisely the history of the church, and the continuity of that history, which draws many to the Roman communion. Second, there is what we might call Calvin’s moral critique. Again, this is utterly essential, but it is hard to do without appearing sectarian in the light of the great promises given to the church and the Scriptural certainty that she will struggle with corruption until the end. Roman corruption has very little apologetic value once one is inclined to embrace the Roman conception of the church built upon Peter the rock. Third, there is Calvin’s theological argument. The keys are tied to the Word and the Word condemns the Roman doctrine decisively. This is the centerpiece of Calvin’s argument and he is masterful in his labors at this point. But any given piece of exegesis may be, and has been, challenged. Texts on the church’s ministry and government have been variously construed even in the Reformation churches.

What is required in our view is an approach to the nature of the church and her ministry that cuts behind this or that particular point of controversy and sets the question of the papacy in a wider perspective. Of course, it is Calvin’s work on the marks of the church and the ministry of the Spirit which points the way and suggests the path we intend to follow.

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4 Of course Calvin gives his, albeit guarded, approbation to the first few centuries and tends to see the corruption as gradually increasing into the Middle Ages. Our point is simply that many others, rightly or wrongly, read this history quite differently.

5 We are not affirming that taking up a position contra Calvin’s is necessarily warranted or correct, simply that it is a reality on the ground.
We do not want to be construed as saying Calvin does not, in many spots, move along the trajectories we shall sketch. While we will offer some criticism, it is largely a matter of pointing out that certain arcs, if filled out and more robustly and consistently followed, provide a more satisfying critique. In our view Calvin’s case can be strengthened considerably, and to some extent reconfigured, by exegesis and theological reflection in a number of directions.

Our intention is to focus on the implications of the ascension of Christ for giving Calvin’s critique a more thoroughgoing coherence. We will look at the ascension and explore its implications for a putative human headship in the church, for viewing the redemptive historical uniqueness of the apostolate and Peter’s role as its leader, for the keys of the kingdom, the marks of the church, and the church’s historical existence as a charismatically endowed and eschatologically conditioned reality, namely, the body of Christ.

Finally, we believe that the analysis Calvin does on the integrity of the bodily ascension of Christ for properly construing His presence in the eucharist can be applied to his broader ecclesiology. Thus, we shall seek to extend Calvin’s conception of participation in Christ’s humanity in the Supper to the question of ecclesiastical orders and papal headship. This has a prima facie plausibility because in the eucharist the church comes to profound expression as the body of Christ in communion with its head. The question of the papacy moves along the same lines, namely, what is the body of Christ, and how does it relate to its ascended head.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the papacy is immense. We shall constrain ourselves to focusing on two areas. First, the historical background as it pertains to the time leading up to and including the first generation of the Reformation. This period begins with the conciliarist movement which arose during the Great Schism (1378-1417). Here we will rely on a number of key secondary sources. Klaus Schatz’s *Papal Primacy: From Its Origins to the Present*, is a clear and helpful historical summary by a German Catholic scholar sympathetic to the high papalist claims. Francis Oakley’s *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300-1870*, presents the conciliarist tradition from the viewpoint of a Catholic scholar sympathetic to its claims. *Conciliarism and Papalism*, a volume in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, edited by J.H. Burns and Thomas M. Izbicki, has a helpful introduction to the state of affairs in the early sixteenth century and presents a number of texts on both the papal and conciliarist sides. In addition, this text has

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8 The essential claim of conciliarism is that a lawfully assembled council of the church is superior in jurisdiction even to the Pope.

Cardinal Cajetan’s 1511 work, *The Authority of Pope and Council Compared*,\(^\text{10}\) which presents the argument for supreme papal authority.

To establish the official Roman Catholic viewpoint of the period, in addition to Cajetan’s work, we will use the work of Luther’s opponent, John Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces: Against Luther and Other Enemies of the Church*.\(^\text{11}\) Eck represents the prevailing high papal view and his work is, in substance, the doctrine later codified at Vatican I in 1870. The decree of Vatican I can be found in Stephen K. Ray’s *Upon This Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church*.\(^\text{12}\) Finally, we will use the Vatican II documents\(^\text{13}\) to show that, while attempting to restore some conciliar balance, they nevertheless, reiterate and affirm the teaching of Vatican I.

For Calvin’s views we will use a number of primary sources. Fundamentally, we will rely on his exposition of the church in Book IV of his *Institutes*.\(^\text{14}\) It is here that we have his critique of the papacy and his theology of the church in their most concentrated form. However, to get a fuller picture of Calvin’s thought we will consult a variety of his

\(^{10}\) Burns and Izbicki, eds., *Conciliarism and Papalism*, 1-133.

\(^{11}\) John Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces Against Luther and Other Enemies of the Church*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 18-44.


\(^{14}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV. We will also use some relevant portions of Book III. Hereafter referred to as x.y.z where x is the book, y is the chapter and z is the section.
commentaries focusing on his exposition of the gospel texts used by Rome to support the papal claims.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition, we need to engage some of Calvin’s relevant polemical works dealing with the papacy. *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* \textsuperscript{16} is a 1543 work prepared at Martin Bucer’s request for the upcoming Diet of the Holy Roman Empire in Speyer. It is a vigorous treatise dealing with the corruption in the church and what Calvin sees as the immediately needed remedy. *The Reply to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva* \textsuperscript{17} is a 1539 work, written from Basle during Calvin’s exile from Geneva. This is an irenic reply to a Roman Cardinal seeking to win Geneva back to the Roman fold. Also important is Calvin’s *Antidote to the Council of Trent*, \textsuperscript{18} a 1547 work responding to the then available decrees of the Council.\textsuperscript{19} This work is useful for showing the more hardened positions of the parties as time wore on.

Finally, we need to look at material that will ground Calvin’s critique of the papacy in a more fundamentally architectonic fashion. We intend to do this, as stated, by attempting to construct a more eschatologically robust vision of the church as the body of the ascended

\textsuperscript{15} These can be found in the bibliography and as they appear in the paper.


\textsuperscript{19} The Council of Trent was interrupted multiple times and did not complete until 1563.
Christ. A number of works will be crucial. Douglas Farrow’s *Ascension and Ecclesia* is a stimulating, full-length treatment of the question of the ecclesial implications of the ascension. While Farrow does not bring his work to bear directly on the papacy, he does interact with Calvin and treats the relevant broader ecclesial issues. T.F. Torrance’s work, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, is also helpful for seeing the structural implications of the church as the body of the ascended Christ. These works are of assistance in cutting behind various historical and exegetical arguments and positioning the question of the ministry in broader eschatological context.

In addition to Farrow and Torrance, but serving the same ends, there is a collection of essays by Anglican clergy entitled *The Historic Episcopate in the Fullness of the Church*. All of this work is helpful, but we shall particularly use J.A.T. Robinson’s essay, “Kingdom, Church and Ministry.” Oscar Cullman’s *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* is a Protestant analysis of Peter and the Roman position with an ecumenical perspective. Cullman is helpful on the redemptive-historical uniqueness of Peter and the apostolate. Miroslav Wolf’s volume

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After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity\textsuperscript{25} contains lengthy interactions with the ecclesiologies of Joseph Ratzinger (before he was Benedict XVI) and the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas. Wolf has much helpful reflection on the church as the proleptic gathering of the eschatological people of God. Other helpful works are Veli-Matti Karkkainen’s An Introduction to Ecclesiology,\textsuperscript{26} which reviews various ecclesiologies, including those of Wolf, Ratzinger and Zizioulas. G.C. Berkouwer’s The Church\textsuperscript{27} is useful for our purposes due to its engagement with Rome and its sensitivity to the eschatological nature of the church.

On the kingdom of God, Herman Ridderbos’s The Coming of the Kingdom\textsuperscript{28} is a standard work which, in addition to the kingdom broadly considered, deals with the crucial text in Matthew 16. David Holwerda’s essay “Eschatology and History: A Look at Calvin’s Eschatological Vision”\textsuperscript{29} speaks directly to many of our concerns and sets forth a more dynamic picture of Calvin’s eschatology then is often assumed.

Finally, two important secondary sources that deal directly with Calvin’s view of the church should be mentioned. Milner’s dissertation, John Calvin’s Doctrine of the

\begin{footnotes}
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*Church*\(^{30}\) shows how Calvin sees the church as the history of the restoration of order in the world. Milner’s work on how the marks of the church are correlated to the Spirit demonstrates that Calvin does in fact move along the axis which we feel needs to be more fully developed. Ronald Wallace also provides a thorough treatment of the marks of the church in *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*.\(^{31}\)


CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On the heels of the Avignon papacy (1309-1377) Western Christendom underwent a severe trauma during what is known as the papal schism. From 1378-1417, nearly forty years, the people did not know which of the two contenders was the legitimate pope. This period of crisis saw the emergence of the conciliarist movement which held, with certain variations among the leaders, that an ecumenical council had greater authority than the pope. Of course the church had an ancient synodical tradition, but the schism forced fresh thinking as to how, in the case of two intractable pontiffs, the church as a whole might act to heal the wound.

In 1409 the cardinals in both papal communions called a council at Pisa. The council deposed both popes as heretics and schismatics and elected Alexander V as the new head of the church. But this emergency action failed. The two deposed popes failed to resign and now Christendom was faced with three claimants to the throne of Peter.

The Council of Constance (1414-1418) was then called in an attempt to resolve the now exacerbated crisis. The council was called by the German king and the Pisan pope. When the

32 See the discussion in Schatz, Papal Primacy, 100 ff.

33 Ibid. Schatz differentiates between moderate (controlling conciliar authority exercised in exceptional situations) and radical (general and normal supremacy for councils) forms of the theory.

34 As an emergency measure Pisa represents a quite moderate form of conciliarism.

35 Ibid., 106.
pope, who was asked to resign and originally agreed to do so, fled and called for the cardinals, the council faced a crisis. Under the leadership of Jean Gerson of the University of Paris it refused to allow the pope to dissolve the council. Subsequently, in 1415, the council issued the decree *Haec sancta* which expressly declared the supremacy of the council, or any subsequently called councils, over the pope. Martin V was elected by the council and the Western church had restored a single undisputed pope.

But this “triumph of conciliarism” would be short lived. The Council of Basel (1431-1449) became engaged in a power struggle with Pope Eugene IV who moved the council to Ferrara and then to Florence. The radical conciliar majority remained in Basel and deposed him as a heretic. After a long struggle the papacy emerged victorious, the rump council at Basel elected the currently reigning pope and, finally, dissolved itself.

Conciliar voices, however, did not go silently into the night. Just prior to the reformation the small and “schismatic” Council of Pisa (1511-1512) reasserted *Haec sancta* and the doctrines of Constance. But the small size of this council and the actions of pope Julius II in calling the fifth Lateran Council in 1512 ensured victory for the papal party. As Schatz puts it: “As soon as the battle standards were raised and the pointed question of superiority (who is over whom?) governed the whole fray, it was perfectly natural that the greater efficiency and political abilities of a monarchial papacy would gain the victory.”

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36 A subsequent decree, *Frequens*, required future popes to call councils at regular intervals. Ibid., 109.

37 Burns and Izbicki, eds., *Conciliarism and Papalism*, xiv-xv.

38 Schatz, *Papal Primacy*, 111.
Our purpose here is not to trace the fortunes of the conciliarist movement. We desire simply to show that what Calvin was up against in his day was an ascendant papal absolutism. To this end we will look briefly at two of its most formidable advocates at the time of the Reformation; Luther’s nemesis John Eck, and the Dominican Cardinal Cajetan.

Eck’s views can be found in his *Enchiridion of Commonplaces* written against Luther. He holds that Mt. 16:17 ff. is a promissory grant of primacy to Peter, construed not as first among equals, but as supreme judicial authority. Although the keys were given to the church, “Christ formally gave the keys to Peter, for the benefit of the church; He gave the keys not to one but to unity. Thus Peter acted in the person of the church, just as the Emperor of Germany.” All the authority which resides in the church collectively resides in Peter individually.

This foundational text is corroborated by a number of other lines of evidence. John 21:15, the restoration of Peter where he is commanded to “feed My sheep,” is interpreted as a grant of supreme rulership over the whole church including the other members of the apostolic college. “To Peter alone as the prince of the apostles in the presence of the other apostles, He committed the flock: for ‘to pasture’ in the Scriptures means ‘to rule’.” It is in this post-resurrection context that Peter actually obtains the keys. The Lukan text (22:31 ff.), where Christ prays for Peter’s faith not to fail and exhorts him, upon returning, to strengthen the brethren, is read as a petition for “indefectibility of faith and power to confirm the

40 Ibid., 28.
41 Ibid., 31-32.
42 Ibid., 29.
faithful.” The incident of the shekel in Mt.17:24 ff. shows that “Christ, with many disciples present, equates only Peter with Himself in paying tribute.”

For Eck, numerous texts point to Peter’s supremacy. All the Petrine activity in the first half of the book of Acts is the action of a supreme pontiff. Even “reason persuades that there was a high priest under the old Law whose authority was heard and the monarchial rule is best; and such is the order in the church triumphant.” For Eck succession in this office is self-evident from the nature of the authority bestowed. He does not argue for it expressly. To prove Peter’s primacy, and his subsequent ministry in Rome, is to prove the primacy of the Roman see.

Another representative of the type of exegesis Calvin faced is Cardinal Cajetan. His Authority of Pope and Council Compared argues that the pope, not a council, has supreme power in God’s church. The basis for this is essentially an argument from Peter’s authority over the other apostles. Again the crucial texts are Mt. 16:17 ff. and Jn. 21:15 ff. the latter of which Eck sees as fulfilling the promise of Jn. 10:16 that there would be one fold under one shepherd. This is a divinely established, and thus perpetual, vicariate which comes wholly from above: “You will note…that Jesus Christ instituted such a government, so that you may stop the mouths of those arguing for a royal government instituted by a senate or a free

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 38.

46 Ibid. 30. Note here that the church militant’s order mirrors that of the church triumphant.

47 Burns and Izbicki, Conciliarism and Papalism, 1-133.

48 Ibid., 2-10. This is either poor exegesis or another argument that the earthly church mirrors the heavenly.
people. Not the church, or the Christian people, or a council, however universal, but Christ Himself, who lives and reigns, instituted such a government.”

Cajetan acknowledges that the other apostles had their apostolic authority directly from Christ himself, but this was by a special act of “preemption” since ordinarily all power flows from Peter. “He established a monarchical government, that is, the principate of one, and made Peter the one head of the whole body of the church, from whom the power of jurisdiction and orders was to be derived regularly by all.” Just as Peter received the preemptive favor of the primacy, so the Lord granted the others an extraordinary preemption in giving them “as a favor what ordinarily must be given them by Peter.” The purpose of this distinction is to differentiate the power wielded by the other apostles and the subsequent episcopate from that wielded by the pope. The apostles have power to govern, Peter has an imperial power to command.

Thus, at the time Calvin lived and wrote it was an ascendant papacy claiming supreme juridical power that he faced. The case was built, as we have seen largely on Mt 16:17 ff., John 21:15 ff., Luke 22:31-32 and the early portions of the book of Acts. Succession and indefectibility were seen as built into the promises to Peter in the gospel texts. It is our contention that Rome has not substantially modified its position

\[\text{For example, Vatican I,}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 4.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 10.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 11.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., xvi.}\]

\[\text{Though there have been important changes in tone, demeanor and the way Rome seeks to situate the primacy in its broader ecclesiology.}\]
the apex of papal monarchy, decreed in 1870: “We, adhering faithfully, to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, to the glory of God, our Savior, the elevation of the Catholic religion and the salvation of Christian peoples, with the approbation of the sacred council, teach and explain that the dogma has been divinely revealed: that the Roman pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when carrying out the duty of the pastor and teacher of all Christians in accord with his supreme apostolic authority he explains a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the universal church, through the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, operates with that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer wished that His church be instructed in defining doctrine on faith and morals; and so such definitions of the Roman Pontiff from himself, but not from the consensus of the church are unalterable.”

While Vatican II (1962-1965) gave more attention to the pope in the constellation of the episcopate, the decrees of Vatican I remain in full force. In Christus Dominus, the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, we read: “In the church of Christ the Roman pontiff, as the successor of Peter, to whom Christ entrusted the care of his sheep and lambs, has been granted by God supreme, full, immediate and universal power in the care of souls.”  The church is a visible organization “which our Savior, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter’s pastoral care (Jn. 21:17).” Thus, the chair of Peter “presides over the whole assembly in charity.” In order that the church be one and undivided, Christ “put

54 Ray, Upon This Rock, 246.
55 Flannery, Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, 564.
56 Lumen Gentium, no. 8. Note the use of the same text (Jn. 21:17) used by Eck and Cajetan.
57 Ibid.
Peter at the head of the other apostles, and in him set up a lasting and visible source of the unity both of faith and communion.”\textsuperscript{58} This ministry of juridical and pastoral headship is perpetual because “that divine mission, which was committed by Christ to the apostles, is destined to last until the end of the world (Mt. 28:20).”\textsuperscript{59} Thus, the Roman teaching today is dogmatically equivalent to the high papal views Calvin confronted in his day. Namely, the pope is the vicar of Christ, the visible source of unity and possesses a grant of infallible teaching authority.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Lumen Gentium}, no. 18.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Lumen Gentium}, no. 19.
CHAPTER 4
CALVIN’S BROADER ECCLESIOLOGY

High View of the Visible Church and the Ministry

Calvin does not evade the conflict with Rome by retreating into a low or mystical ecclesiology. He elucidates an extraordinarily high view of the church in the early sections of Book Four of his Institutes. The visible church, he says, is our mother and “there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Mt. 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.”

This work of lifelong maturation is done through the ministry. The ascended Christ, “that He might fill all things,” appointed the ministry for building up the body of Christ unto perfect manhood (Eph. 4:10-13). Thus, at the outset, Calvin points up the importance of the ascension for his view of the ministry and this passage in Ephesians 4 is crucial for his overall viewpoint. The ascension removes Christ from us bodily (Acts 3:21) but it enables the coming of the Spirit (Jn. 7:39) by which He “fills all things.” Of the five ministries mentioned in Eph. 4:11, apostles, prophets and evangelists (the latter of which Calvin sees as

60 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.4. Note the somewhat Platonic contrast between this life and the future life to come: putting off mortal flesh and becoming like the angels.

61 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.5.

assistants to the apostles) are temporary, only pastors and teachers, which he sees as distinct offices, are perpetual in the church. 63

The ministry, flowing as it does from the ascended Christ, has an essentially charismatic nature. “It is He Himself who gave them; for if He does not raise them up, there will be none. Another inference is that no man will be fit or equal for so distinguished an office who has not been formed and made by Christ Himself. That we have ministers of the gospel is His gift; that they excel in necessary gifts is His gift; that they execute the trust committed to them, is likewise His gift.” 64

The ministry is thus utterly necessary for the right ordering of the church. 65 No one can despise this order since “God often commended the dignity of the ministry by all possible marks of approval in order that it might be held among us in highest honor and esteem, even as the most excellent of things.” 66 Indeed, in a text with strong eschatological overtones, Calvin says the ministry is crucial for the restoration of the world: “Now this work is the edification of the church, the eternal salvation of souls, the restoration of the world,

63 We will not focus on Calvin’s exact ordering of these offices. Our concern is with his theory of the ministry broadly construed.

64 Calvin, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, 178.

65 Calvin, Institutes, 4.3.2. Yet, notably, as will become clear, the ministry is not an independent, stand alone order which guarantees the existence of the church. Yet, it is nonetheless “the ministry, a ministry Christ so ordained in the church, that, if destroyed, the upbuilding of the church would fail (Eph. 4:12).” Institutes, 4.1.11. It is an order dynamically “ordered” and maintained by the Spirit.

66 Calvin, Institutes, 4.3.3.
and, in fine, the Kingdom of God and Christ. The excellence and splendor of this work are beyond value.”

By means of a human ministry God accomplishes two additional things: “on the one hand He proves our obedience by a very good test when we hear His ministers speaking just as if He Himself spoke. On the other He provides for our weakness in that He prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to Himself, rather than thunder at us and drive us away.”

Both faith and the power to save come through the preaching of the gospel (Rom 1:16, 10:17). Even as the Old Testament Temple is adorned with glorious titles so that we may esteem the human priestly ministry there, so also in the New Testament God places His treasure in “earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7) and “appears in our midst, and as Author of this order, would have men recognize Him as present in His institution.” Even as the Old Testament law had interpreting priests, so today the minister is the very mouth of God. Just as the law and the prophets are living images of God, so also in the apostolic preaching the glory of God shines in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). It is thus by common accord, through the ministry, that the church keeps the order established by God.

As God is the author of this preaching, so He joins His Spirit to it and promises benefits from it. The fruit which comes from this is that we are “born anew” (1 Pt. 1:23)

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68 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.5.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.
through the gospel. Thus, Paul can say that he “begat the Corinthians through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15) and that they are the “seal of his apostleship” (1 Cor. 9:2). Of course, in all of this, it is the Lord who does the saving through the ministerial instrument.

A Crucial Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

We have already seen the importance of Ephesians 4 to Calvin’s conception of the ministry. Here we will take a close look at his exegesis and its significance for our thesis. In the Institutes, as mentioned, Calvin points out that Christ ascended “that He might fill all things.” In the commentary he says “when we hear of the ascension of Christ, it instantly comes to our minds that He is removed far from us; and so indeed He is, with respect to His body and human presence. But Paul tells us that He is removed from us in bodily presence in such a way that He nevertheless fills all things, and that by the power of His Spirit…He ascended – but that He, who was formerly contained in a little space, might fill heaven and earth.”

Here we see both the strength and a weakness in Calvin’s conception. By grounding the ministry in the gifts of the ascended Christ by means of His Spirit he gives the ministry a wholesome eschatological cast. Yet, he nearly always conceives of the ascension as creating a purely spatial problem. But surely Jesus is removed from our space and our time. It is this temporal dimension which we find to be attenuated. We shall explore the implications of this later.

71 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.6.
72 Calvin, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, 177.
Calvin, with great acumen, teases out the significance of this passage for the Roman primacy. “Papists have reason to complain, that their primacy, of which they boast, is here assailed and insulted. The discussion is on unity. Paul assembles not only the reasons which establish it among us but also the symbols by which it is nourished. He comes at length to the government of the church. If he was aware of a primacy with one seat, was it not his duty to exhibit one ministerial head placed over all the members, under whose auspices we are collected into a unity? Certainly, either Paul’s oversight is inexcusable, in leaving out the most appropriate and powerful argument, or we must acknowledge that this primacy is alien to the appointment of Christ.” This is no weak argument from silence. The nature of the discussion demands mention of the sine qua non of ecclesial unity which Rome alleges.

But it is not just the dimension of unity which makes this such a crucial passage. It is the detailed exposition of ministry which serves that unity in the church. “In fact, he plainly overturns this fictitious primacy, when he ascribes superiority to Christ alone, and subjects the apostles, and all the pastors, to Him, in such a way that they are colleagues and comrades of one another.”

Calvin recognizes the centrality of this text when he says “there is no passage of Scripture which more strongly overturns that tyrannical hierarchy, in which one earthly head is set up.” It is Christ’s episcopate which forms the ground of the church’s unity. “Cyprian followed Paul and defined briefly and clearly what is the lawful monarchy of the Church.

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73 The allusion is to Eph. 4:1-6.

74 Calvin, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, 177.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.
There is, he says, one episcopate, a part in which is held by individuals collectively. This episcopate he claims for Christ alone.\textsuperscript{77} This headship of Christ has not been transferred.\textsuperscript{78} The sole monarchy of Christ means the ministry is a joint allotment, a corporate participation in His priesthood. The results are that the papacy is viewed as “a deformed hump which destroys the whole symmetry of the Church, when one man, setting himself up against the head, exempts himself from the number of the members. The papists deny this, and pretend that the pope is only a ministerial head. But they cannot escape by this quibble. The tyranny of their idol is altogether contrary to that order which Paul here commends.”\textsuperscript{79}

In this passage Calvin strikes a number of important themes, namely, the living headship of the ascended Christ over the church, the corporate nature of the ministry arising out of the body of Christ, and the disruption to the “symmetry” of this order introduced by the papacy. These are, we believe, crucial components in a full-orbed argument against Rome. Here Calvin comes to some key conclusions with which we wholly agree. Our contention will be that these conclusions can be given a firmer basis. With respect to this passage, this is necessary for a number of reasons.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. The full citation from Cyprian is in \textit{Institutes}, 4.2.6.

\textsuperscript{78} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.6.9. “Since Scripture attests that Christ is head and claims this honor for Him alone, it ought not to be transferred to anyone else except to one whom Christ Himself has appointed His own vicar. But this is nowhere read, and can, in fact, be abundantly refuted from many passages (Eph. 1:22, 4:15, 5:23; Col 1:18, 2:10).”

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. 184. Calvin’s anti-hierarchical position is evident. Thus, he views the ancient archbishops and patriarchs as connected with the maintenance of discipline. “Some called the government thus constituted a “hierarchy,” an improper term (it seems to me) certainly one unused in Scripture. For the Holy Spirit willed men to beware of dreaming of a principality or lordship as far as the government of the church is concerned.” \textit{Institutes}, 4.4.4.
First, the argument from silence, strong as it is, should not be overplayed. The text is not an exhaustive treatise on unity or ministry.\textsuperscript{80} Second, the question of a ministerial papacy is denounced as contrary to the order of this text, but the argument seems to be that it is not mentioned and those ministries which are mentioned must be allotted a specific, limited role. Yet, it does not seem impossible to imagine gradations within the various ministries listed and still protect the sole monarchy of Christ. Indeed, the presence of apostles and prophets would even suggest such a “hierarchy” at least in the founding era of the church.

Calvin contends, rightly, that the apostles and prophets were temporary.\textsuperscript{81} The apostles had a temporary mandate “to publish the gospel throughout the world, to plant churches, and to erect the Kingdom of Christ.”\textsuperscript{82} But his argument lacks a full account of the once for all, redemptive-historical and eschatological nature of the apostolate.\textsuperscript{83} Also, neither the unity of the faith which we are striving to attain or the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13) are understood as the eschatological telos of a church which lives and ministers by the power of the age to come. Our point is that his eschatology \textit{tends} to be flat, that is, it moves from left to right along the temporal axis and consists of two great moments, the first

\textsuperscript{80} For example, the one bread and one cup (1 Cor. 10:16-17) are not mentioned in the verses on unity (Eph. 4:1-6), yet we cannot conclude that Paul did not know of them, or that the Supper is not a divine institution crucial for expressing and maintaining the unity of the church.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 180.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 179.

\textsuperscript{83} Which we shall expound in our evaluation of Calvin. In the same way the commentary on Eph. 2:20 takes “prophets” to be Old Testament prophets and thus misses the structural, redemptive-historical, and foundational aspect of the apostles. See Calvin, \textit{Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians}, 155.
and second advents of Christ. The power of the time of the age to come, invading, and existing parallel, if you will, to this present evil age, and as such, in the Spirit, shaping the church’s life and ministry, is lacking or underdeveloped. We will attempt to show later just how this helps in the case against the papal office.

**The Marks of the Visible Church**

While God knows the church in its invisible aspect in accord with His secret election, and individuals in it are to be recognized by “a certain charitable judgment” based on confession of faith, example of life, and participation in the sacraments; the visible church itself, as the very body of Christ, is “set off by plainer marks.”

“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.” Note that the Word here, while, as Calvin makes abundantly clear elsewhere, is measured against the touchstone of Scripture, it is not equivalent to Scripture itself. It is the preached Word. It is ministerial proclamation under the unction of the Spirit. “The Scripture has not been committed to us in order to silence the voice of pastors, and…we ought not be fastidious when the same exhortations often sound in our ears; for the Holy Spirit has so regulated the writings of the prophets and the apostles that He detracts nothing from the order instituted by Himself; and the order is, that constant exhortation should be heard in the church from the mouth of

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84 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.8.

85 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.9.
pastors.” As the Spirit has inspired the written Word, so He is the author of the order of ministerial preaching. “The preaching of the Word of God is an order which emerges only in the correlation of the Spirit and the biblical Word of God in the work of the preacher.”

This mark also includes the reverential hearing of the Word. Thus, wherever the Word has “a fixed abode it shows its effectiveness.” By this correlation of preaching and hearing Calvin gives the marks, which could be construed statically, a dynamic quality. Significantly, Calvin follows this famous description of the marks with the statement: “for His promise cannot fail: ‘wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them (Mt. 18:20)’” This sets forth one area where we feel Calvin’s eschatological instincts are excellent. Indeed, the marks, when they appear, “cause the church to come forth and become visible to our eyes.”

Yet, it is right here that we note Calvin’s dominant tendency to see the eschatological nature of the church’s ministry in purely spatial terms. Commenting on 1 Cor. 13:12 he says: “We who have not reached the great height of angels, behold the image of God as it is

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86 John Calvin, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and The First and Second Epistles of St. Peter, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. William B. Johnston (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1963), 216, quoted in Milner, Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church, 100. The citation is Calvin’s comment on Heb. 13:22.

87 Milner, Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church, 110. The idea of “correlation” is important because it protects Calvin’s insistence that the Spirit is free and not bound to the preached Word or the sacraments in any quasi-physical, apriori manner.

88 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.10.

89 Ibid. There is a definite, and important “by their fruits you shall know them” aspect to Calvin’s defense of the Reformed churches and ministry.

90 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.9.

91 Ibid. In this sense one might call the church an “event” in Calvin.
mirrored before us in the Word, in sacraments, in fine, in the whole service of the church….Our faith, therefore, at present beholds God as absent….because it sees not His face, but rests satisfied with the image in the mirror” (emphasis mine).  

The spatial emphasis is noteworthy in a text which is clearly working with a now (partial), but then (full) temporal dynamic. While Calvin recognizes the reference to the last day, he construes the already not yet dialectic in quasi-Platonic terms: “Our souls will then be set free from our bodies, and we will have no other further need of either the external ministry or other inferior aids.”  

This tendency in Calvin supports our contention that the New Testament’s full, overlapping, two-age construction is lacking. The relation between this age and the next is seen almost wholly in linear terms during which the Spirit’s presence solves the spatial absence of Christ.

The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper constitute the second mark of the church. Here, as in the ministry, God is accommodating Himself to our weakness. Calvin’s definition of a sacrament is “an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences His promises of good will towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in turn testify our piety towards Him, both before Himself, and before angels as well as men.”

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93 Ibid. For other Platonic references to the body, or the “prison house of the flesh,” or “the weight of the body” see, *Institutes*, 1.15.2, 2.7.5, 2.7.12, 2.7.13, 3.2.3, 3.2.19, 3.3.20, and 4.1.1. Some of these references may point to a vertical cosmology and thus a “flatness” in eschatology, others may be explainable by the rejection of Thomas Aquinas’ Aristotelianism.

94 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.1 quoted in Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 133. Note that in seeing both the ministry and the sacraments as accommodations to us Calvin creates a legitimate, but non-eschatological dialectic between God and our weakness.
Calvin’s sacramental theory is well known and it is not our intention to rehearse it here. We may summarize its broad features as follows. The sacraments are utterly dependent upon the Word, apart from which they are unintelligible. “In divinely given sacraments, two things are to be regarded: the substance of the corporeal symbol which is proposed to us, and the form impressed upon it by the Word of God, in which all its power consists.”

They are signs and seals of the covenant. As such, the sign and the thing signified may be distinguished but never separated. The sacraments, thus, operate in nexus of the Spirit’s freedom and the recipient’s faith. In this correlation they hold forth Christ to worthy receivers.

Our interest here lies in how Calvin works out the problem of Christ’s bodily absence, occasioned by the ascension, in his doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. The fundamental problem is as follows. Believing that Scripture teaches a true participation in Christ’s humanity, Calvin rejects a Zwinglian symbolic or memorialist reading of the Supper. “Moreover, I am not satisfied with those persons who, recognizing that we have some communion with Christ, when they would show what it is, make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of flesh and blood. As though all these things were said in vain: that His flesh is truly food, that

and finitude. The accommodation seems to lack a Christological, and thus a temporal dimension.

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95 Calvin, Institutes, 4.19.7.

96 Calvin, Institutes, 4.14.15.

97 Ibid.

98 Calvin, Institutes, 4.14.16.


100 Calvin, Institutes, 4.17.3.
His blood is truly drink (Jn. 6:55); that none have life except those who eat His flesh and drink His blood (Jn. 6:53); and other passages pertaining to the same thing!"\textsuperscript{101}

At the same time Calvin holds that the Roman and Lutheran views, which require Christ’s humanity to be in or with the elements, and thus make Him ubiquitous, involve, in the light of the ascension, a Christological absurdity.\textsuperscript{102} “Calvin freely and frequently admits that his answer to the question ‘What is given in the sacraments?’ is exactly the same as those of the Lutherans and the Roman Church. He agrees with his opponents that the flesh of Christ is given in the sacrament.”\textsuperscript{103} The question revolves around the mode of the gift.

The concrete reality of the ascension governs Calvin’s thinking. The body of Christ, in which He wrought our redemption, remains in heaven, beyond this world, and retains all its human properties.\textsuperscript{104} Thus the ascension creates what might be called the real absence. “The logic of the angels is incontrovertible. ‘He is not here,’ they said. ‘He is risen.’”\textsuperscript{105} The body of the risen and ascended Lord, now in heaven, can be in one and only one place at a time. “Now the condition of flesh is, that it should have one certain place, its own dimensions, its own form.”\textsuperscript{106} And this glorified body of Christ remains in heaven until the judgment. Citing Acts 3:21, Calvin says “we deem it utterly unlawful to draw it back under these corruptible

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\textsuperscript{101} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.17.7. He says we eat by faith, and rejects the notion that faith or knowledge is the eating. \textit{Institutes}, 4.17.5.

\textsuperscript{102} Calvin is working towards a genuinely Chalcedonian solution where the two natures of Christ are joined in one hypostasis and thus not separated, divided, mingled or confused. Each nature must, according to Chalcedon, retain its own attributes.

\textsuperscript{103} Wallace, \textit{Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament}, 199.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 204.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{106} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.17.24.
elements or to imagine it to be present everywhere.”

For Calvin two things govern how we must view the presence of Christ in the Supper. We must preserve His heavenly glory and we must not ascribe anything inappropriate to human nature to His body. To place Christ in or under the elements is to “annihilate the glory of the ascension” and to engage in an idolatrous “leaping of the infinite spaces, to reach beyond heaven itself to Christ.”

Calvin’s solution to this problem is well known. “Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure His immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated by space.” The mystery of this overwhelms Calvin, indeed “there is nothing more incredible than that things severed and removed from one another by the whole space between heaven and earth should not only be connected across such a great distance but also be united, so that souls may receive nourishment from Christ’s flesh.” Thus, the famous allusion to the ancient Sursum Corda. “We must raise our hearts up to heaven, not

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110 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.15.

111 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

thinking that our Lord Jesus is so debased as to be enclosed under some corruptible elements."^{113}

What is important to see is that it is a descent of Christ, by the Spirit, which then causes us to ascend or be lifted up to heaven and participate in His glorified humanity. “We say that Christ descends to us, as well by the external symbol as by His Spirit, that He may truly quicken our souls by the substance of His flesh and of His blood.”^{114} Calvin’s opponents do not understand “the mode of descent by which He raises us up to Himself.”^{115} In this descent-ascent correlation, wrought by the Spirit of the bodily absent and ascended Christ,^{116} Calvin preserves a crucial eschatological emphasis in his doctrine of the eucharist. We really partake of Christ, yet the eschatological reserve of the “already not yet” interim is preserved. We partake of the eucharist in hope that “we may grow more and more together with Him until He perfectly joins us with Him in the heavenly life.”^{117} We wait for the ascended Christ from heaven (Phil. 3:20) even as the angels instructed us (Acts 1:11).^{118}

Yet, as a careful look at the citations from Calvin in this section will show, he “handled the dialectic of presence and absence almost exclusively in spatial terms, and hence, in a non-

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^{113} Calvin, Short Treatise on the Holy Supper, in Dillenberger ed., John Calvin: Selections from His Writings, 541. See also Institutes, 4.17.18.

^{114} Calvin, Institutes, 4.17.24.

^{115} Calvin, Institutes, 4.17.16.

^{116} “The coming of the Spirit and the ascent of Christ are antithetical.” Calvin, Institutes, 4.17.16.

^{117} Calvin, Institutes, 4.17.34.

^{118} Calvin, Institutes, 4.17.27.
eschatological fashion.” While we would qualify this to say “a less than fully robust” eschatological fashion, the absence of the time dimension is significant. We will contend that, as with the ministry, this spatial exclusivism prevents Calvin from seeing the sacraments as fully eschatologically conditioned realities. We believe that establishing this, and extending Calvin’s grand solution to the bodily presence of Christ in the supper, can provide a useful line of criticism against the papacy. For now, let us note that, for Calvin, the marks of the church, like the ministry itself, are an achievement of the risen Christ through His Spirit.

Against Schism From a Church with the Marks

The church then is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) because she is the keeper of God’s truth that it may not perish in the world. As such, she is His bride (Eph. 5:27) and His body (Eph. 1:23) and “separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ.” The church which has the Word and the sacraments in their fundamental integrity is not to be rejected “even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.” Even if the marks themselves may be, to some extent, faulty, recognition that there is a hierarchy of truths should prevent non-essentials from breaking the unity of the church.

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119 Farrow, Ascension and Ecclesia, 178. “We need only notice that his vertical orientation made it difficult for him to factor time into the equation, that is, to subject temporal relations, to the same pneumatological reinterpretation with which he experimented in spatial relations.”

120 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.10.

121 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.12.

122 Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.12. Calvin sketches the essentials as “God is One, Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s free mercy; and the like.”
Calvin’s horror of schism is evident here. Against the Cathari, the Donatists and the Anabaptists, he says the scandal is no occasion for leaving the church. In this context he cites the parables of the dragnet and the sower (Mt. 13) to indicate the eschatological resolution to the problem of evil in the church. The church’s holiness is not yet complete (Eph. 5:25-27). Even the Corinthians, swarming with “frightful misdeeds,” and the Galatians, “all but deserters of the gospel,” were counted by the apostle Paul as churches. Here Calvin invokes the example of the Old Testament prophets with respect to the Jerusalem church. In the face of great corruption they did not separate. They “considered that the Lord had set His word among them and had instituted rites wherewith He was worshiped there, thus they stretched out clean hands in the midst of the assembly of the wicked.” Finally, he points up the example of Christ and the apostles who participated in the divine worship at Jerusalem even though the nation as a whole was corrupt. The sacraments, he says, are not made unholy by unclean men. The forgiveness of sins not only admits us to, but is continually found in, the visible church.

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125 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.18.
CHAPTER 5

ROMAN CORRUPTION

Rome’s Corruption of the Marks

The situation the reformers find themselves in however is not equivalent to that of the prophets or Christ and His apostles. Rome resembles Israel in her corruption but not in her possession of divinely instituted dogmas and worship. “Instead of the ministry of the Word, a perverse government compounded of lies rules there, which partly extinguishes the pure light, partly chokes it. The foulest sacrilege has been introduced in place of the Lord’s Supper. The worship of God has been deformed by a diverse and unbearable mass of superstitions. Doctrine (apart from which Christianity cannot stand) has been entirely buried and driven out.”  

Thus, unlike the prophets and apostles in their historical settings, who “were not compelled to any superstitious worship,” the reformers must separate from the Roman communion.

Calvin recognizes what is at stake in defining and recognizing true ecclesial communions. “If anyone recognizes the present congregations, contaminated with idolatry, superstition and ungodly doctrine, as churches (in full communion of which a Christian man must stand, even to the point of agreeing in doctrine), he will gravely err.” When he gives the reason for this we come to the heart of his thesis against Rome and especially against the Papacy. “For if they are churches, the power of the keys is in their hands; but the keys have

128 Calvin, Institutes, 4.2.2.
129 Calvin, Institutes, 4.2.9.
130 Calvin, Institutes, 4.2.10.
an indissoluble bond with the Word, which has been destroyed from among them. Again, if they are churches, Christ’s promise prevails among them; ‘Whatever you bind,’ etc. (Mt. 16:19, Mt. 18:18, Jn. 20:23).”¹³¹

The keys have an indissoluble bond to the Word and Rome has broken that bond. The Word here is primarily Scripture. “Paul reminds us that the church was not founded upon men’s judgments, not upon priesthoods, but upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20).”¹³² Rome, in corrupting the Word possesses the name, but not the reality, of the church. “Accordingly, we are to refute them by the very argument with which Jeremiah combated the stupid confidence of the Jews. That is, “Let them not boast in lying words, saying, ‘This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord’” (Jer. 7:4). For the Lord nowhere recognizes any temple as His save where his Word is heard and scrupulously observed.”¹³³ With the use of the text from Jeremiah, Calvin strikes another important note in his polemic which is often repeated. The church is never given apriori guarantees to which it can appeal to validate itself apart from a living faithfulness to the Word. “Pastors are mistaken if they imagine that they are invested with the government of

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Calvin, Institutes, 4.2.4. Again, here as in his commentary on Ephesians, Calvin sees the foundation as the doctrine of the apostles and (Old Testament) prophets which is dichotomized from their persons as the eschatological foundation of the church. While the Word is primarily Scripture, for Calvin it includes the preaching ministry of the church as well, insofar as it accords with Scripture. Thus, the sacraments and ministerial absolution, as functions of the Word, are also seen as ministries of the keys. The forgiveness of sins “is dispensed to us through the ministers and pastors of the church, either by the preaching of the gospel or by the administration of the sacraments; and herein chiefly stands out the power of the keys, which the Lord has conferred upon the society of believers. Accordingly, let each one of us count it his own duty to seek forgiveness of sins only where the Lord has placed it.” Institutes, 4.1.22.

¹³³ Calvin, Institutes, 4.2.3.
the church on any other terms than that of being ministers and witnesses of the truth of God. As long, therefore, as, in opposition to the law and to the nature of their office, they eagerly wage war with the truth of God, let them not arrogate to themselves a power which God never bestowed, neither formerly on priests, or now on bishops.”

Thus, Calvin rejects the charge of schism. It simply reduces to “we adhere to Christ in preference to them.”

Nevertheless, like the ruins of a beautiful building, some sound elements remain in the Roman churches. “I call them churches to the extent that some marks of the church remain, especially those marks whose effectiveness neither the devil’s wiles nor human depravity can destroy.” Yet, this does not make them true churches. “But, on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church.”

**Roman Corruption in Government**

Having indicted Rome on the marks of the church, Calvin also indict her government. In addition to corruption the Word and sacraments, they have defected from the Fathers and trampled the ancient canons. Here with caustic passion he asks Sadolet “will you obtrude upon me, for the Church, a body which furiously persecutes everything sanctioned by our religion, both as delivered by the oracles of God, and embodied in the writings of the

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135 Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 98.

136 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.2.12. Calvin has baptism in view here.

137 Ibid.
holy fathers, and approved by the ancient councils? Where, pray, exist among you any 
vestiges of that true and holy discipline, which the ancient bishops exercised in the church? 
Have you not scorned all their institutions? Have you not trampled all the canons 
underfoot?” Calvin is unafraid to engage the battle on all fronts including the patristic and 
the canonical. Calvin is unafraid to engage the battle on all fronts including the patristic and 
the canonical.**

The canons, not to mention the Word of God, require that the presbyter feed the flock 
and administer the spiritual kingdom of Christ, yet, violations of the canons are legion. 
The piety and learning of the minister are ignored. “This is certain, that for a hundred years 
scarcely one man in a hundred has been elected who has comprehended anything of sacred 
learning. If their morals are appraised, we shall find few or almost none whom the ancient 
canons would not have judged unworthy.” Ministerial exams are a sham. “It is well known 
what kind of examination bishops exercise by means of their suffragans or vicars, and we 
might even be able to conjecture what its nature is from the fruit which it produces.” The 
people’s consent, expressed by voting in episcopal elections, is denied contrary to numerous 

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** Calvin, *Reply to Sadolet*, 93.

139 “The fact is now too notorious for you to gain anything by denying it, viz., that in all these 
points, the ancient church is clearly on our side, and opposes you, not less than we ourselves 
do.” Calvin, *Reply to Sadolet*, 93.

140 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.5.9.

141 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.5.1. see also 4.5.14 “There is scarcely a bishop, and not one in a 
hundred parish priests, who, if his conduct were to be judged according to the ancient canons, 
would not be subject either to excommunication or at least to deposition from office.”

142 Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 50.
canons. “If these things be true, no canonical election remains today in the entire papacy
either by divine or ecclesiastical right.”

The list goes painfully on. Investiture, by which the magistrate appoints bishops,
absentee bishops who do no pastoral work, simony (the buying and selling of bishoprics),
pluralism (one man holding multiple bishoprics), clerical opulence and abuse of power, and
absurdities like boys ten years of age being, by the pope’s dispensation, appointed bishops.

The inexorable conclusion is they are not true presbyters. “They cast off as burdens too
troublesome the preaching of the Word, the care of discipline, and the administering of the
sacraments. For what do they have left by which to boast that they are true
presbyters?...Assuredly, Christ’s word and the observance of the ancient canons exclude
them from the office of presbyter” Calvin is willing to give this conclusion the fullest
scope. He says, concerning all the claims made by the papacy that “even though all these
things were conceded, a brand new conflict with them arises when we say that there is no
church at Rome in which benefits of this sort can reside; when we deny that any bishop exists
there to sustain these privileges of rank.”

Against Apriorism

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143 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.5.2.

144 “Scarcely one in a hundred bishops will be found who ever mounts the pulpit in order to
preach.” Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 50. It is the chief duty of a bishop to
preach, *Institutes*, 4.4.3.

145 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.5.1.

146 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.5.10.

147 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.7.23.
It is clear that Calvin has a functional view of the marks and the ministry by which they are manifested. They can guarantee nothing in advance. When Rome claims that they are, ipso facto, the church, and that this is guaranteed by the presence of apostolic succession, Calvin repeatedly says that true succession is continuity with the apostles’ teaching. “Especially in the organization of the church nothing is more absurd than to lodge succession in persons alone to the exclusion of teaching.”148 “This pretense of succession is vain unless their descendants conserve safe and uncorrupted the truth of Christ.”149

This is a crucial flashpoint in the battle and Calvin wages unremitting war on this front. “They seem to have entered into a conspiracy not to have any kind of resemblance to the apostles or the holy fathers of the church, they merely clothe themselves with the pretense that they are descended from them in an unbroken succession; as if Christ had ever enacted it into a law, that whatever might be the conduct of those who presided over the church, they should be recognized as holding the place of the apostles, or as if the office were some hereditary possession, which transmits alike to the worthy and the unworthy.”150 As Gregory has said “those who abuse privilege deserve to lose privilege.”151 The ministry is no right of inheritance. “Nothing could be further from the minds of the holy fathers than to prove

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148 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.7.23. Of course, given what we have said above, Calvin sees the succession Rome claims as interrupted on moral grounds as well. See also *Necessity*, 51. He can also criticize it on grounds of historical interruption, see *Institutes*, 4.2.2.

149 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.2.2.

150 Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 53.

151 Ibid., 54.
absolutely, as if by right of inheritance, that the church exists wherever bishops succeed one another.”\textsuperscript{152}

Since the outward church can be, and in this case is, false, succession can be, at most a sign of pure teaching. To make it an apriori guarantee is to get things backwards. “When they add that they cannot deliver anything but the genuine oracles of the Holy Spirit, because they are under His guidance, and that all their decisions cannot but be true, because they sit in chairs of verity, is this not just to measure their power by their caprice?”\textsuperscript{153} Godly pastors are to be reverenced and heeded only inasmuch as they promulgate the Word purely.\textsuperscript{154} Calvin illustrates this using a favorite proof text of his opponents. Did not Christ command his disciples to heed the Jewish leadership because they sit in Moses’ seat (Mt. 23:3)? To this Calvin replies that Christ also said to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees (Mt. 16:6). To sit in Moses’ seat means one must teach Moses’ law. Calvin cites Augustine in his defense: “For by sitting in the seat they teach God’s law; therefore, God teaches through them. But if they would teach their own laws, hear it not, do it not.”\textsuperscript{155}

To cast a man upon the church is “too indolent a theology” for we must be armed for battle with the Word. “Paul informs us, (Eph. 6:17), that the only sword with which he can fight is the word of the Lord. A soul therefore deprived of the Word of God is given up

\textsuperscript{152} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.2.3. “For we are not concerned with some hereditary honor which can be given to men while they are sleeping, but about the office of preaching from which they strenuously flee.” \textit{Institutes}, 4.5.13.

\textsuperscript{153} Calvin, \textit{Necessity of Reforming the Church}, 22.

\textsuperscript{154} Calvin, \textit{Reply to Sadolet}, 103-104.

\textsuperscript{155} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.10.26.
unarmed to the devil for destruction.”¹⁵⁶ Here we see that this matter is an intensely pastoral one for Calvin. The very logic of the Roman conception will lead to a passive and vulnerable flock. “For the safety of that man hangs by a thread whose defense turns wholly on this – that he has constantly adhered to the religion handed down to him by his forefathers. At this rate, Jews, Turks, and Saracens, would escape the judgment of God.”¹⁵⁷

This polemic against apriorism in Calvin is extremely important and he will apply it to the papacy as well. In our view he is exactly correct. Nevertheless, we will seek to show that a more robust eschatological understanding of the church and its ministry can place this argument on even firmer grounds.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, Reply to Sadolet, 105.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 115. The latter half of the quotation is clearly for rhetorical effect.
CHAPTER 6
CALVIN’S DOCTRINE OF ECCLESIASTICAL POWER

Ecclesiastical Doctrine

Before we look at Calvin’s critique of the papacy proper we must examine his doctrine of ecclesial power in general. First, we desire to look at the church’s power with respect to laying down articles of faith.\(^{158}\) The crucial thing here is to edify the church and preserve Christ’s authority intact (Mt. 17:5).\(^{159}\) Moses, Christ and the apostles spoke only according to the Word. The great esteem with which the ministry of the church must be held is because “whatever authority and dignity the Spirit in Scripture accords either to priests or prophets, or apostles, or successors of apostles, it is wholly given not to the men personally, but to the ministry to which they have been appointed; or (to speak more briefly) to the Word, whose ministry is entrusted to them.”\(^{160}\) Thus, as we have seen, the ministry does not validate the Word, but rather the Word validates the ministry.\(^{161}\)

Calvin rehearses the redemptive-historical process by which the Lord gave His Word to the “more visible form of the church.”\(^{162}\) He sets forth clearly the Reformation’s

\(^{158}\) Calvin breaks up his discussion of ecclesial power into three sections: doctrine, jurisdiction and making laws or discipline; but there is much overlap and we have condensed the material under two heads: doctrine and jurisdiction. In many ways this material represents a prolongation of Calvin’s polemic against apriorism.

\(^{159}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.8.1.

\(^{160}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.8.2.

\(^{161}\) “The power of the church, therefore, is not infinite, but subject to the Lord’s Word and, as it were, enclosed in it.” *Institutes*, 4.8.4. “Our opponents locate the authority of the church outside God’s Word; but we insist that it be attached to the Word.” *Institutes*, 4.8.13.

\(^{162}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.8.6-7. Clearly, the Word, in this context, is Scripture.
commitment to Sola Scriptura: “Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription of and standard of this Word.”

Thus, ministers, unlike the apostles who “were sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit,” do nothing but “teach what is provided and sealed in the Holy Spirit.” As such, they speak the oracles of God (1 Pt. 4:11). This subjection to the Word applies, not only to individual men or ministers, but to the church as a whole. This is because faith comes from the word of God (Rom. 10:17) and thus it is not subject to “the word of the whole world.”

Against Infallibility

Calvin rejects the Roman claim to infallibility whether it is said to reside in the pope, a council or in the church as a whole. While the church has been given many excellent promises concerning the Holy Spirit’s presence and guidance (Jn. 14:16-17, 16:13; Mt. 28:20 etc.), “believers, even those who have been given more excellent gifts than the rest, in this flesh receive only the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23).” Here we see Calvin using the situation of the church in the interadvental period to argue his case. Particularly, he

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163 Calvin, Institutes, 4.8.8.
164 Calvin, Institutes, 4.8.9.
165 Calvin appears to be confronting an argument that would exempt the magisterium from the strictures of the Word.
166 Calvin, Institutes, 4.8.9.
167 Calvin, Institutes, 4.8.11. We may have here another quasi-platonic use of “flesh.”
emphasizes the “not yet.” “For all confess with Paul that they have not yet reached the goal (Phil. 3:12). Therefore, they strive toward daily advancement more than they boast of perfection.”

Against the Roman claim that such texts apply to individuals but not the church, supported by texts such as Eph. 5:26-27 (that the church might be cleansed by the washing of the water of the word) and 1 Tim. 3:15 (the church is the pillar and support of the truth), Calvin says “the previous passage teaches what Christ does each day in the church rather than what he has already accomplished.” Neither the members, nor the church as a whole are holy and spotless. However, Calvin does recognize a definitive sanctification for both church and members. “It is true, therefore, that the church has been sanctified by Christ, but only the beginning of its sanctification is visible here; the end and perfect completion will appear when Christ, the Holy of Holies (cf. Heb., ch. 9-10), truly and perfectly fills the church with His holiness. It is true that the church’s spots and wrinkles have been wiped away, but this is a daily process until Christ by His coming completely removes whatever remains.”

Here Calvin uses the “already not yet” dynamic in a robust way with both the “already” (definitive sanctification) and the “not yet” (daily cleansing) present in the argument. He says “unless we accept this, it will be necessary to affirm, with the Pelagians, that the righteousness of believers is made perfect in this life; likewise, with the Cathari and

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168 Ibid.

169 Calvin, Institutes, 4.8.12.

170 Ibid. We realize that definitive sanctification is not a term Calvin would recognize and that in Book Three of the Institutes other terms do the work that this one does. Our point is that the reality is present but underplayed.
Donatists, to brook no weakness in the church.”  

This is an insightful and intriguing remark. In the corporate context where it occurs we might say that Calvin is accusing Rome, in its contention that the church collectively possesses an intrinsic and inviolable holiness, of a Pelagian ecclesiastical perfectionism.

While the point that the Church is not perfect in this life is clear, it must be pointed out that neither individually, nor corporately, is Rome Pelagian, or, as Calvin’s own exposition of their moral laxity shows, given to the separatist rigors of the Cathari or the Donatists. This is a clue that Calvin is not as clear as he might be on precisely what is the nature of the error in the claim that the church corporate is holy.  

While introducing the idea of definitive sanctification he nevertheless describes the error in non-eschatological terms (Pelagianism, etc.). It seems that here Calvin wants to say that this error involves an over-realized eschatology as it bears down on the question of ecclesial holiness. Of course, he virtually does say this, but he reverts to the purely linear, historical analogy easily. In any event, one would have to ask why the eschatological already (definitive holiness) doesn’t count for grounds upon which to establish ecclesial infallibility, while the eschatological not yet (daily cleansing) counts against it? We would suggest the reason is, that while the intrusion of definitive holiness is acknowledged, it is not robustly embraced since virtually nothing can be cashed out of it in light of the “not yet.” What we will try to show is that both the “already” and the “not yet” can be used against the Roman papal claims.

\[171\] Ibid.
\[172\] Of course, this holiness is connected to the claim of ecclesial infallibility.
This polemic against infallibility extends to Calvin’s discussion of councils and their authority. He acknowledges his respect for the councils but the same fundamental dynamic is at work; they are subordinate to the Word. “Here the norm is that nothing detract from Christ. Now it is Christ’s right to preside over all councils and to have no man share His dignity. But I say that He presides only when the whole assembly is governed by His Word and Spirit.”

He cites Mt. 18:18 ff. and says that a council is not gathered in Christ’s name unless it cleaves to His word. Councils are thus a provisional judgment under the Word. He claims that the truth can support itself apart from, or even against, councils, citing various Old Testament examples and the condemnation of Christ “by that council which the high priests and Pharisees convened at Jerusalem.” Thus the truth does not die in the church through abusive councils, “but is wonderfully preserved by the Lord so that it may rise up again in its own time.”

The ability, historically demonstrated, of the holders of the pastoral office to defect from the truth means that councils are fallible. The attempt by Rome to limit this kind of ecclesial error to the old dispensation is rebuffed by Calvin with a string of New Testament texts showing the predicted defection of pastors and the need for diligence and careful discrimination. In light of Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders in Acts twenty he asks

174 Ibid.
175 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.9.7.
177 Calvin cites 2 Pt. 2:1, Mt. 24:11, 24; Acts 20:29-30, 1 Tim 4:1, and 2 Tim 3:1ff., 4:3. He also cites 2 Thess, 2:4 which he applies, in other places, to the Roman papacy. *Institutes*, 4.9.13.
“since the pastors could become so degraded in such a short time, how much corruption could a long succession of years bring among them?”¹⁷⁸ While the coming of the Spirit brings much blessedness, it does not bring an infallible church. Of course, Rome’s claims to infallibility amount simply to conciliar and papal preservation from error, which may in some instances be the case, but it is the apriori nature of the claim that Calvin rejects.

Here we see Calvin’s strong doctrine of covenant continuity. The problems which infested Israel still plague the church in the new dispensation. Both testaments are full of warnings against false prophets and teachers. So covenant continuity is added to the pilgrim nature of the church in the interim and they work together in a polemic against infallibility. Here the question is, does Calvin do full justice to the coming of the New Covenant (the “already”) and the glorious promises given to the church, simply by pointing out that there is a set of “not yet” texts as well? While we agree in the main with Calvin’s exegesis and conclusions, he again treads lightly on the “already” dimension, as if only the “not yet” supported his case. We will look later at this question of the church’s subjection to error and testing and ask if the coming of the eschatological kingdom can shed some light on Calvin’s approach.

**Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction**

With this section we will look at Calvin’s view of church discipline which he calls “the exercise of the office of the keys.”¹⁷⁹ If doctrine is the church’s soul, discipline is its

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¹⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.9.4.

Discipline is exercised by church courts comprised of ruling elders together with the pastors. The keys have been given to the church, as distinct from the civil magistrate, by Christ in Matthew chapter 18 where “the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin is for the future transferred to Christ’s flock.”

The power of the keys is the power of binding and loosing, through the Word of God, because “the church binds him whom it excommunicates…it looses him whom it receives into communion.” When the church acts in accord with the Word “the Lord testifies that such judgment by believers is nothing but the proclamation of His own sentence, and that whatever they have done on earth is ratified in heaven.” On this ground we can say that Calvin sees the keys as eschatological, but, again, it is conceived of in purely vertical terms. Heaven to earth is the key vector. “The word of the gospel, whatever man may preach it, is the very sentence of God, published at the supreme judgment seat, written in the Book of Life, ratified, firm and fixed, in heaven.” Where he does introduce linearity into the

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181 Ibid. Calvin sees Mt. 16:19 and Jn. 20:23 as dealing with general doctrinal authority while the Mt. 18 text addresses discipline. He acknowledges the distinction is far from absolute. As to the court itself, he says, “Christ here instituted nothing new but followed the custom always observed in the ancient church of His people.” *Institutes*, 4.11.4. See also, John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol.2. ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T.H.L Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 229. “He tells us that in His church the same order is to be kept that was instituted of old under the holy law.”

182 In Mt. 16 and Jn. 20 Calvin will equate binding and loosing with preaching the gospel, here the focus is discipline.

183 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.2.

184 Ibid.

185 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.1.
equation it is a flat, two-stage process. “For although Christ is the unique Judge of the earth, yet, in the interim He wished to have ministers as heralds of His word.”186 What is lacking, it seems to us, is the notion that the keys bring the *time* of the age to come to bear on the present evil age and thus possess a fully eschatological quality.

For Calvin, clearly, it is conformity to the law of God which gives the keys their certainty.187 But the Word, as always, is correlated with the Spirit. Referring to Jn. 20:23, he denies that the Roman priests are successors of the apostles. “For Christ did not give the power of binding and loosing to the apostles before He gave them the Holy Spirit. I deny that anyone can use the keys unless the Holy Spirit has first come to teach him and tell him what to do.”188 The keys are thus a charismatic endowment of the risen Christ. “The Holy Spirit is the judge and keeper of the keys.”189 Thus, absolution works under the Word in the nexus of the Spirit’s work and the faith of the penitent. It is only in this context that certainty of pardon is obtained.190

This power was given “that no one may stubbornly despise the judgment of the church.”191 When he considers the edifice that Rome has built on this text, containing, among

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187 Even in the case of confession (corporate or individual, public or private) “we must always beware lest we dream up some power separate from the preaching of the gospel.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.14.

188 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.20.

189 Ibid.

190 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.20. Here the contrast is with the Roman need for “exact and integral” confession, the proper intentions of the priest and penitent, etc.

191 Ibid.
other things, confession, the right to frame laws, indulgences and the primacy of the Roman see, he remarks caustically, “thus they know so well how to fit their keys to any locks and doors they please that one would say they had practiced the locksmith’s art all their lives!”

This work is one which involves the whole assembly acting in concert with the agency of the presbyters. Calvin realizes that the term “church” is anachronistic in Mt. 18:17 and says it reduces to judgment by an elect council such as existed among the Jews. He acknowledges that in First Corinthians chapter 5 the incestuous man is excommunicated by the whole congregation (together with Paul) but he adds, “since the crowd never does anything with moderation or dignity unless they are guided by advice, a presbytery was appointed in the ancient church, i.e., a college of elders, who, by common consent, were entrusted with the first inquiry into a case.” The result is “that this particular discipline must be exercised by the elders consulting together, and with the consent of the people.”

What is not completely clear is to what extent, if any, Calvin sees the keys as residing in the whole church. Does the church simply consent to the administration of the keys by the presbytery, or do the keys belong to the body in some fundamental way, regardless of how, in the differentiated priesthood of the church, they may be exercised by the presbyters? He can say, in the context of the church practicing the jurisdiction conferred on it by the Lord, that “no one may despise such a judgment of the church or regard condemnation by vote of

192 Ibid.
194 Calvin, The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 107. The comment is on 1 Cor. 5:4.
195 Ibid.
the believers as a trivial thing.”

But he can also say “although the bishop with his clergy possessed a power of reconciliation, it required at the same time the consent of the people.” Does the congregation condemn or simply consent? Perhaps more decisive is the statement, in the context of discussing Paul’s actions in First Corinthians chapter 5 again, that “the elders do not do it by themselves alone, but with the knowledge and approval of the church; in this way the multitude of the people does not decide the action but observes as witness and guardian so that nothing may be done according to the whim of the few.”

In the context of a critique of the Roman doctrine of penance Calvin says “the power of the keys of which we speak so depends upon baptism that it should by no means be severed from it.” This would suggest that perhaps the keys are the property of the whole baptized body, but the reference is really to the power of the keys received by the penitent. “The sinner receives forgiveness by the ministry of the church, that is, not without the preaching of the gospel. But what is the nature of this preaching? That we have been cleansed of our sins by Christ’s blood. Yet what is the sign and testimony of that washing but baptism? We therefore see that absolution has reference to baptism.”

On balance it appears that the church witnesses and guards the work of the keys but does not corporately possess them. This finds further confirmation in Calvin’s connection of the keys with pastoral exhortation and absolution, both public and private. Referring to Jas.

196 Calvin, Institutes, 4.12.4.

197 Calvin, Institutes, 4.12.6. Calvin cites Cyprian to support this point.

198 Calvin, Institutes, 4.12.7.

199 Calvin, Institutes, 4.15.4.

200 Ibid.
5:16, he suggests we choose pastors to confess to since “they are better fitted than the others because the Lord has appointed them by the very calling of the ministry to instruct us by word of mouth to overcome and correct our sins, and to give us consolation through assurance of pardon (Mt. 16:18, 18:18; Jn.20:23).”

This is a difficult question but let us make the following observations at this point. The discourse in Matthew 18 is given to the disciples and there is no need to restrict this to the twelve. In any event it is clearly the ecclesia which binds and looses in 18:18, a promise extended to “two of you” in 18:19 and “two or three” in 18:20. The early stages of discipline in the Matthean process also suggest, in accord with James’ “confess your sins to one another,” that the keys are operative in the whole scope of the community’s life. The text in First Corinthians 5 clearly envisions the whole congregation, with Paul’s spirit, engaging in the act of excommunication. In John chapter twenty it is again the disciples, and not just the apostles, who are addressed. More significantly, this “Johnanine Pentecost” is a down payment on, and thus, integrally related to, the Spirit fully given at Pentecost. Calvin, who sees the gift as given to the apostles, himself says “this breathing should therefore be referred and extended especially to that magnificent sending of the Spirit which He had so often

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201 Calvin, Institutes, 3.4.12. Notice the use of all three “key” texts.


203 Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 845. “The indications are that in this chapter these words are addressed to others than the apostles.”
promised.” Thus, the gift in John twenty is organically related to the Pentecostal endowment of the whole church.

What is at stake in this question is whether the keys are grounded in the life of the body of the ascended Christ or whether they are conceived of as a distinct possession of the ministry. Insofar as the presbytery possesses them in a functional and ministerial way there is no problem. The danger in the ambiguity we see is the possibility of setting up the key holders as a separate and distinct order from the priesthood of the body. The tendency in this direction can lead, and indeed has led, to a Protestant kind of apriorism.  


205 Again, for clarity, we are not accusing Calvin of this, but it seems to us that he does not give the keys the full dimension of depth they possess in the eschatological body of Christ.
We have surveyed Calvin’s broad ecclesiology against its historical backdrop. In this light we looked at his indictment of Roman corruption. Next, we surveyed his conception of ecclesiastical power in the area of doctrine and jurisdiction. Having covered this ground, we have seen Calvin’s criticisms of the Roman system, many of which apply directly, all of which apply indirectly, to the papacy. What remains is for us to look at the papal office itself.

Calvin acknowledges the importance of the papacy in the Roman system when he calls it “the capstone of the whole structure.” 206 It functions as the ecclesial starting point. “When they discuss their hierarchy, they always start from this principle: the Roman pontiff (as the vicar of Christ, who is head of the church) presides over the whole church in Christ’s place; and the church cannot otherwise be well constituted unless that see hold primacy over all others.” 207

Referring to the argument from the Old Covenant’s high priesthood, which, as we have seen, was used by Eck, Calvin rightly points out that this office was a type of Christ to whom it was transferred. Christ’s keeps this office without vicar or successor “for this priesthood

206 Calvin, Institutes, 4.6.1.

207 Ibid. Here we two of the three central claims of the papacy. A vicariate exercising Christ’s headship over the visible church, and the center of unity or good order, to which a third must be added, namely, doctrinal infallibility.
consists not in teaching only but in appeasing God, which Christ by His death has accomplished, and in the intercession which He now makes in His Father’s presence.”

Calvin then turns his sights to the specifically Petrine texts used to establish the papacy. He says they have nothing other than Mt. 16:18, and Jn. 21:15 with which to make their case. It is to Calvin’s understanding of these two texts that we now turn.

Concerning Matthew 16 and the power to bind and loose, Calvin, citing Jn. 20:23, says that binding and loosing consists in nothing other than forgiving and retaining sins. This binding and loosing occurs through the preaching of the gospel. “Since heaven is opened to us by the doctrine of the gospel, the word ‘keys’ affords an appropriate metaphor.”

“The manner of binding and loosing is repeatedly shown in Scripture, but Paul best states it when he says that the ministers of the gospel have the command to reconcile men to God and at the same time to exercise vengeance upon those who reject this benefit (2 Cor. 5:18, 10:16).”

Men are thus loosed by faith and bound by unbelief. The result is that “Christ pronounces that it is by the preaching of the gospel that there is revealed on earth what God’s future and heavenly judgment will be and that we must not look elsewhere for certainty of life or death.”

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208 Calvin, Institutes, 4.6.2.
210 Calvin, Institutes, 4.6.4.
211 Ibid. He uses Rom. 3:24 and Jude 6 for the same binding/loosing parallel in Institutes, 4.11.1.
212 Ibid.
This succession in the gospel “does not please the pope” so Calvin must contend over what specifically was promised to Peter in the key grant of Matthew 16. For Calvin it is the dignity of the post-resurrection apostolic office which is in view and from Matthew 18 and John 20 he concludes that nothing was given to Peter which was not also given to the others. As to why Peter was given the keys separately and the others received them in common Calvin, following Cyprian and Augustine, says this was done to commend unity.

In his exposition of the phrase “upon this rock” Calvin sees Peter as a type of all believers inasmuch as they are “founded on the faith of Christ.” “Who cannot see that what He transfers to the person of a man was first said about Peter’s faith in Christ?” Noting the difference in Greek between petros (Peter) and petra (rock), Calvin grants that they mean the same thing in common parlance but thinks the variation in endings points to a difference. He cites Augustine who says “petra does not come from Peter, but Peter from petra, just as we are all Christians from Christ.” “From this it appears how the name Peter

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214 Calvin, Institutes, 4.6.4.

215 Ibid. The point stands whether the “disciples” in these texts are restricted to the apostles or not.

216 Ibid. Despite the long tradition of this interpretation we find little or no textual support for it. We shall seek, in light of the eschatological nature of the apostolate, to give a more redemptive-historical grounding to Peter’s “firstness.”


219 Ibid. Here we must, with numerous Protestant commentators, disagree. We believe the exegetical conclusion that the “rock” in the Matthew passage refers to Peter’s person is established. This is commonly accepted by many Protestant interpreters today. See, among the possible examples, Herman Ridderbos, Matthew: Bible Student’s Commentary, trans. Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 303, where it is asserted: “There is no good
belongs both to Peter and to other believers; that is, founded on the faith of Christ they are fitted by a holy concord into the spiritual building, so that God may dwell in their midst.”

Christ wishes “to join with Peter all the believers who are going to exist in the world.”

As to Peter’s eminence, in addition to the sign of unity, Calvin says, he was “placed among the first in the building of the church.” As such his primacy is one of honor and not rank, a dignity which, as the early chapters of Acts show, the others willingly yielded to him. To establish Peter’s collegial relationship to the other apostles Calvin appeals to his behavior at the council in Acts chapter 15. “He indeed refers to a council anything that is done, and advises what needs to be done. But at the same time he listens to the others, and he not only lets them express their views, but leaves the decision to them; when they have decreed he follows and obeys (Acts 15:5-12).” Similarly, in Galatians “for almost two chapters Paul contends solely that he is Peter’s equal in the office of the apostle. Hence, he recalls that he came to Peter, not to profess subjection, but to attest their agreement in

reason to think that Jesus switched from petros to petra to show that he was not speaking of the man Peter but of his confession as the foundation of the church. The words ‘on this rock [petra]’ indeed refer to Peter.” The change in ending is attributed to the inappropriateness of using the feminine petra as a man’s name. See also Cullmann, Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr, 206-207 and France, The Gospel According to Matthew, 254.


221 Ibid. Note that with respect to the keys Calvin sees the dignity of the apostolic office, but with respect to the “rock” nature of Peter he sees a type of all believers. This is a highly unlikely and unnatural distinction. The text requires a reading in which Peter’s “rockness” is related to his possession of the keys. If Calvin were to join Peter the apostle with his function as a picture of all “living-stone” believers, a likely supposition on our reading, he would have to grant that the keys belong in a fundamental way to all believers.

222 Calvin, Institutes, 4.6.5.

223 Ibid.

224 Calvin, Institutes, 4.6.7.
doctrine before all…Paul expressly argues that no one may put either Peter or John ahead of him in the apostolate, for they were his colleagues, not his masters.”225 Thus, the two lines of argument against Petrine supremacy here are, that the keys were given to all and the fact that Peter functions collegially in the New Testament.

While he takes the rock to be faithful Peter together with all believers, the church is not founded upon Peter. Against this “all Scripture cries out….for there is but one foundation, as Paul says, apart from which no other can be laid (1 Cor. 3:11).”226 Thus “the pope’s invention of another foundation can be nothing but a sacrilegious blasphemy.”227 Calvin seems unwilling to recognize Peter as a rock-foundation in even a secondary sense.

The John 21 text, where Peter is told to “feed my sheep” need not detain us long. Calvin says simply that this is the restoration to apostleship after Peter’s denial. “The reason why Christ thrice appoints him as pastor is to wipe out the three denials by which Peter brought everlasting shame on himself so that it shall not hinder his apostleship….moreover in these words there is nothing given to Peter which is not common to all ministers of the gospel.”228

Finally, Calvin claims that even granting all that Rome claims for Peter from these texts does not entail succession. Not only, because as we have seen, Christ headship and monarchial episcopate are not transferable, but “if the continual lawful succession were in

225 Ibid.

226 Calvin, Institutes, 4.6.6.


228 Calvin, The Gospel According to St. John, 220. Recall Eck and Cajetan used this text to support Petrine supremacy.
fact valid, the pope would wring nothing from it until he had proved that he was Peter’s lawful successor.”

Again, this is no hereditary right. “Even if the successor of Peter had been the bishop of Rome by right, yet when by his teaching he usurped so much honor for himself, he lost whatever Christ conferred on His successors.”

What is noteworthy for our thesis is that in these crucial texts, as well as in Ephesians 2:20 and 4:1-16, Calvin gives no account of the redemptive-historical, foundational uniqueness of the apostolate, much less of Peter’s rock/key function within it. We will attempt to show that an examination of that foundation and its role in the church as the body of the risen and ascended Christ can strengthen his overall polemic and help illumine the unique role of Peter.

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CHAPTER 8

EVALUATION AND REFLECTIONS: THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST

The Ascension and the Apostolic Foundation

We have already seen that the once-for-all, historically unique and unrepeatable function of the apostolate, while something Calvin surely acknowledges, is lacking full explication precisely in places where we would expect it. We saw, that in Eph. 2:20, the foundation was conceived of doctrinally and not in redemptive historical categories. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive but we believe the accent is in the wrong place. In Eph. 2:20, for example, the foundation is the chronologically unique, and antithetical counterpart to the body, the eschatological temple (Eph 2:21-22), which is built on it. As in Revelation chapter 21, where the city rests on the apostolic foundation stones (Rev. 21:14 ff.), we have two, and only two fundamental categories: foundation and superstructure or building. Among other things, this so grounds the post-apostolic ministry in the corporate priesthood of the building that there is not, indeed, there can not be, any structurally definitive tertium quid between the foundation and the superstructure. Here Calvin’s polemic against apriorism receives a more decisive grounding.

It is in this light that the Matthew 16 rock reference should be ascribed to Peter. He has a unique role in the apostolic foundation, one which precludes succession and any subsequent

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232 Calvin sees the apostles as temporary ministries belonging to the founding era and in Institutes, 4.8.9, for example, distinguishes their gift of inspiration from the ordinary ministry that succeeds them. Our contention is simply that a more thorough outworking of the implications of this would improve his case.
ministerial office which functions in an apriori way over against the building. Here Calvin would have done well to invoke Isa. 51:1-2: “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you.” The rock metaphor here must be understood as affirming the unique, unrepeatable, historical and foundational role of Abraham for the subsequent life of Israel.

What remains is to explain the firstness, the primacy of Peter, in a way that does not reduce to being among the first stones in the building (Calvin) or to the establishment of a supreme juridical office (Rome). We believe such an explanation lies ready at hand. We construe Peter’s firstness as a redemptive-historical leadership within, but not over, the apostolic college. This is clearly seen in the structure of the early chapters of the book of Acts and Peter’s prominent role therein. Specifically, Peter, on the day of Pentecost, is the first to open the kingdom of God to the Jews by means of preaching the gospel. Secondly, in the incident with Cornelius in Acts 10, concomitant to the vision of the unclean animals, Peter is the first to open the kingdom of heaven to the Gentiles. In this way we can see that Peter’s historically unique rock function coheres, contra Calvin, with his epochal key holding proclamation of the Word to both Jews and Gentiles.

We must develop this further. The resurrection and subsequent ascension of the Lord Jesus means, among other things, that one cannot draw a straight line from the historical disciples to the apostles. With the resurrection, the time of the age to come has broken into our time. The apostolate itself is thus an eschatological gift of the ascended Christ. We see this repeatedly in the New Testament. Both 1 Cor. 12:29 and Eph. 4:11 affirm that the

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233 This text could be seen as supporting the idea that Peter is a type of all believers even as all the saints are “dug” out of Abraham. We do not intend to impugn the correctness of this idea, but we do hold that the Mt. 16:18 reference is to Peter in his historically unique role.
Apostles are given to the church by the ascended Lord. In Lk. 22:28-30, significantly in the context of the eucharist, Jesus bestows a kingdom on the twelve and promises that they will eat and drink with Him in that kingdom and shall sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Mt. 19:28 makes the same promise which shall be received “in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on His throne of glory.” In this context, the text in Rev. 21 is to the same effect. The eschatological city has “twelve foundations and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14).

Thus, the function of the apostles is not simply a historically foundational and unique one, it is, at the same time, fully eschatological. The result of this is that the eschatological images (Mt. 19:28, Lk. 22:29-30, and Rev. 21:14) of twelve equal, and equally foundational, apostles precludes the idea of a supreme Petrine throne. The eschatological end determines the beginning and thus our reading of Peter’s primacy as redemptive-historical and within the apostolic college is vindicated. Historical juridical equality among the apostles must be true because, exegetically, it is true of the eschatological city of God, the city which has broken into time with the gift of the apostolate and Peter the rock. Thus, we believe Calvin’s critique of the papacy is given a more architecturally sound footing.

The Ascension and the Keys

It is in this perspective that the keys, and the Petrine use of them, should be set for they are the keys of the eschatological kingdom. This kingdom had broken into our space and our time, albeit in an “already not yet” fashion. The ministry of the keys then is not simply a spatial heaven-to-earth ministry, it is a temporal future-to-present ministry. In his commentary on Matthew Calvin, in a rare temporal reference, says “therefore Christ
pronounces that it is by the preaching of the gospel that there is revealed on earth what God’s future and heavenly judgment will be.”234 This is correct but surely more must be said. If the keys are the keys of the kingdom which has come then the gospel exercise of those keys not only proclaims a future but it brings that future to bear on our time, albeit with an eschatological reserve. Mt 16:19 makes it clear that the keys bring the kingdom. Jn 20:22-23 sees the keys as the work of the eschatological Spirit which the risen Christ breathes upon the disciples, and Mt. 18:16 ff., sets the efficacy of the keys in the presence of the ascended Lord who “is in the midst” of the church. Thus, like the apostolate, the keys are verified definitively by the end, by the eschatological Christ who, in the work of the keys, confronts men.235

Here we must say more about the “already” dimension brought by the keys of the kingdom, for it is certainly the case that the Papacy grounds its claims in this pole of the eschatological tension. Of course, the “already” being a gift of the future mitigates against the keys as a standing apriori grant of authority, but it does more that that. The grant of the keys in Mt 16:19 comes in the context of the initiation of eschatological warfare. Christ builds upon the rock foundation He is establishing and “the gates of Hades” shall not prevail against the building (Mt. 16:18).236 The coming of the kingdom and the gift of the keys bring


235 We shall flesh this out further when we look at the eschatological nature of the marks.

236 It should be noted that the powers of darkness may very well be seen as an aggressive force here. If the keys unleash the gospel, the “gates of Hades” can be seen as unleashing the demonic powers. This attains some degree of likelihood given Matthew’s use of “the house built on the rock” which withstands the assaults of nature in Mt. 7:24-27.
an unleashing of heightened apocalyptic warfare. Thus, the keys in their fundamental gospel, and subsidiary disciplinary function, are instruments of cosmic warfare.  

Here we feel we can strengthen Calvin’s argument that the “not yet,” as well as the covenant continuity the church has with Israel, leave her subject to the same susceptibility to corruption as the Old Covenant church. The coming messianic kingdom, in accordance with Old Testament expectation, unleashes the judgment of the end into our time. Here we recall the ministry of John the forerunner who heralds the announcement of the kingdom as a warning to flee the wrath to come and piles up fierce images of the fiery judgment Messiah stands ready to execute. The appeals to Israel’s faithlessness, even in the face of possessing the Old Testament sacraments, apply precisely because the church is the community “upon whom the ends of the ages has come.” (1 Cor. 10:11). It is precisely

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237 The power of the keys are regularly construed to broadly include disciplinary and doctrinal functions based on later rabbinical “halakic” usage of the terms “bind and loose” as equivalent to “forbid and permit.” Rome relies heavily on the traditional rabbinic interpretation. See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford: Tan Publishers, 1960), 280 for an official interpretation. Also, Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, John Ruemann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 97 state that the power of the keys “might include one or more of the following: baptismal discipline; post-baptismal or penitential discipline; excommunication; exclusion from the Eucharist; the communication or refusal of knowledge; legislative powers; and the power of governing.” This work is a joint project of Protestants (mostly Lutheran) and Catholics. However, see Joel Marcus, “The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Mt:16:18-19),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50.3 (1988): 451. Also, Richard H. Heirs, “‘Binding’ And ‘Loosing’: The Matthean Authorizations,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104.2 (1985): 233. These articles present a strong case for a more “warfare oriented” and less “halakic” view in the Matthew 16 text.

238 Mt. 3:1-12. Significantly, for our purposes, the apriori appeal to tradition (“we have Abraham as our father”) is useless in the face of the coming fire.
because “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Pt. 4:7) that “the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God” (1 Pt. 5:17).  

Thus, it is precisely the “already” of the keys of the kingdom which, in addition to blessing, place the church in a situation of peril. The ambiguity of the “already” cuts across the whole of the church’s life and to grant the papal throne, in its claim to a perpetual center of unity, structural headship and dogmatic infallibility, immunity to this danger is not only an over-realized position with respect to the “not yet,” it is an under-realization of the warfare that attends the “already.” While this does not, of course, determine any given piece of the exegetical dispute with Rome, it does more robustly preclude apriori independent correctness precisely at the point where Rome places it.

The Ascension and the Building

The Time of the Church: Orders

The ascension of Jesus, as we have seen, both creates a real absence and, at the same time, enables His real presence. In so doing it leaves us with a precarious task. 240 The two must be brought into a right relation and seen together. The church remains a profoundly historical community which, nonetheless, has experienced a profound disruption in its continuity with this age. The consequence is a kind of ecclesial ambiguity, what Farrow calls

239 While we cannot explore this here, let us suggest that this is one reason why Paul validates his ministry by weakness and suffering, looking for an eschatological vindication, rather than by appeal to the Jerusalem apostles, e.g. (1 Cor. 1-4).

240 “To grapple with this mystery of the presence and the absence is indeed ecclesiology’s constant challenge. Where either side of that mystery is neglected the mystery of the church itself is undone.” Farrow, Ascension and Ecclesia, 3.
“the precarity of ecclesial being.” This is essentially an eschatological problem since the real presence and the real absence are correlated to the already and the not yet. Any construction of the presence (already) which leaves us without an eschatological reserve and any construction of the absence (not yet) which leaves us without real communion with the ascended Christ must be rejected.

This is a question which must involve attention to both space, which Calvin does reasonably well, and time, where we feel he needs improvement. Jesus is not only spatially absent, He lives in the time of the new order. The resurrection of Christ inaugurates a new time, the time of the end, which does not simply reside in the future but has invaded the time of “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) and the “form of this world which is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). The time of this age Torrance, quoting Brunner, calls “crumbling time.” It is time in need of redemption for the days are evil (Eph. 5:14).

Thus the resurrection and ascension entail the truth that “the continuity of the church and its ministry cannot therefore be interpreted simply in terms of historical succession on the stage of this world…but must be interpreted in terms of the redemption of time in the body of Christ…The church that lives by historical succession and finds the guarantee of its life therein, seeks to live by the ‘weak and beggarly elements’ from which we have been redeemed (Gal. 4:9).”

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241 Ibid., 105.  
243 Ibid., 51. While one must question Torrance’s use of Gal. 4:9 here, and add the caveat that historical landmarks are wonderful and inevitable, his basic point stands.
The relevance of this to the question of orders is obvious. “A true doctrine of order must do justice to both aspects of order and to both sides of the essential ambiguity. It must show that the church, which continues to live in ongoing history, lives as the body of the risen and ascended Lord and therefore does not possess its orders in the unbroken continuum of the space and time of this world. How could it? It lives a life from beyond itself, and therefore looks beyond the historical forms of its orders to find its true being and form in the risen humanity of Christ.”²⁴⁴ The result is not the abolition of orders “any more than it means the abrogation of the church’s historical existence, but it does mean that they are relativized and that the church is given a new orientation within them.”²⁴⁵

The ministry then, while having its authority from the ascended Christ, arises out of and is ordered to, the body. “To establish the validity of the ministry on grounds independent of the authority of the living church (e.g. by linear succession of the episcopal consecration), and then to judge whether a church is part of the body by whether it has a valid ministry, is to invert the whole New Testament conception.”²⁴⁶ Thus, in the nature of the case, the Roman claims, if not rejected outright, need to be viewed with a good dose of suspicion.

It is this fundamental, architectonic structure which moves the debate with Rome over apriorism beyond a matter of interpreting this or that particular text into more primordial theological concerns. For example, if, as asserted, the resurrection and ascension forbid

²⁴⁴ Torrance, Royal Priesthood, 56.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. In Torrance’s hand this is also a polemic against any divine right view of orders, but that need not distract us from the fact that orders cannot be apriori independent verifiers of ecclesial being.

²⁴⁶ Robinson, in Carey, The Historic Episcopate, 15. It should be noted that Robinson was an Anglican. This grounding of the ministry in eschatological life of the ascended Christ and its structural implications is another area that we feel Calvin points us to but does not work out rigorously in his polemic with Rome.
drawing a straight line from the historical disciples to the church, then any conception of the church as the body of Christ which sees it as a continuation of the incarnation is illegitimate. Thus, the ecclesial conclusions which are so often drawn from this well, things like infallibility, are not warranted.

We must then situate the ministry of the church within this eschatological tension. All the texts we have adduced on the eschatological nature of the apostles apply here. All the charismata given to the church are gifts of the ascended Christ. “The episcopate of the church (that is, of Christ in His church) is that which stands between, and mediates to this present age, the episcopate, the visitation, of God to His people in Christ’s first coming and in His last….Between these two moments the episcopate is committed to the church in its ministry to ‘exercise the oversight’ (1 Pt. 5:2), till ‘the chief Shepherd shall be manifested’ (1 Pt. 5:4), the Shepherd who is Himself the Episcopos of souls (1 Pt. 2:25).” 247 The ministry is thus given its full eschatological texture and as such it partakes of the features of our current ecclesial ambiguity.

It is clear that Calvin, while having a general and dynamic framework of ministry, still tends to think in non-eschatological terms, or, where he is thinking eschatologically, it is in a flat, two-stage linear fashion. One indication of this is how he handles the validity of the Reformed ministry. Because he lacks the conception we have sketched he ends up doing two things. First, he essentially defrocks the whole ordained ministry of the Western church by declaring that they don’t have any bishops or presbyters. 248 Then, to justify the Reformation,

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248 They are lawful, but not true, ministers and the “ordinary” government of the church belongs to them. See Milner, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church*, 142, 150.
he makes its ministry the work of an extraordinary dispensation of God. After saying that apostles, prophets, and evangelists (understood as apostolic delegates) are temporary, he writes “still, I do not deny that the Lord has sometimes at a later period raised up apostles or at least evangelists in their place, as has happened in our own day.”

So the apostolic ministry, whether required by the transition from Moses to Christ, “or ‘to lead the church back from the rebellion of the Antichrist,’ i.e., from the Roman priesthood to the Reformed ministry, is consistently held to be extraordinary.”

The case of the Reformation is regularly tied to the case of the prophets in the Old Testament or Christ and the apostles under the Jewish hierarchy.

With all due deference to the uniqueness of the Reformation, and the great difficulty Calvin faced, we must ask if this does not lead to a compromising of the once for all the apostolic foundation of the church. If this were simply analogy it would not be problematic, but it is more than analogy.

Here we see the need to justify the Reformed ministry in terms of historical order, and when that order is absent, the appeal is to a quasi-epochal Divine action. We contend that the better angels of Calvin’s nature point him in the directions we have sketched. Ministry arises out of, and is ordered to, the whole priesthood the church and

249 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.4. Referring, as McNeill points out in the footnote, to Luther. Also, “when religion has broken down, He raises up evangelists apart from church order to restore pure doctrine.” Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 180.

250 Milner, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church*, 141.

251 Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 94-96.

252 Milner makes it clear that these parallels are not “adventitious, for they (the Reformers – KC) were equally confronted with the necessity of breaking away from, or denying, the lawfully constituted order by which the church was to be governed, and equally justified in taking that course of action by the abuse of ministerial authority.” *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church*, 150-151.
is validated dynamically as a gift of the ascended Christ. This much Calvin essentially acknowledges in his comments on Eph. 4:1-16.

If this is true then Christ’s priesthood is the only essential ministry in the church and participation in it is primarily corporate. This entails the episcopate being one and held in solidum. Calvin makes this latter point as we have seen and recognizes the disruption the Roman hierarchy creates within the imagery of Eph. 4:1-16. His theory of the ministry has its own coherence and he could, it seems to us, justify it without deciding definitively on Roman orders. The argument would be that God, by His Spirit, is working through the corporate priesthood of the church to raise up ministers faithful to His Word. In doing so He would be breaking up and reconfiguring the existing order in an “extraordinary” way, in the sense of historically unprecedented, but not in the sense of a new redemptive-historical epoch. While historical continuity in orders is a blessing it cannot ultimately be decisive for the church’s being. It possession is, at best, a mark of the church’s fidelity not a guarantee. Doctrinal continuity with the apostolic foundation, as we have seen him say, must win the day. As the matter stands we see a straddling of historical, linear and juridical categories with the fully pneumatic and eschatological.

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253 See Torrance, Royal Priesthood, 35.

254 Calvin, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, 180.


256 As an aside it would be an important study to see if Calvin extends the notion of continuity to baptism, service, obedience, witness, suffering, the Supper and the like to give it a fully corporate dimension and more historical realism.

257 This is also evidenced by Calvin’s ambivalence about whether or not ordination is a sacrament. As a concession he says it is a sacrament, Institutes, 4.19.31, but he refuses to number it among the “ordinary” sacraments, Institutes, 4.14.20.
The Time of the Church: The Marks

Now, we shall extend this framework to the marks of the church. Here we can only sketch out briefly some initial lines of reflection. The ascended Christ exercises His headship over the church by His Word and Spirit. In doing so He overcomes the spatial and temporal dimensions of His absence but in an eschatologically conditioned fashion. In this light we must affirm that the marks themselves are eschatological intrusions into our historical order. Scripture, like the apostles by whose ministry it comes, is both a redemptive-historical foundational deposit and, simultaneously, an eschatological gift. It is given to us “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). The preached word, based upon Scripture, is the gospel of the kingdom and is a manifestation of its presence. To “taste the good word of God” is to taste “the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:6). The preached word not only points to the end, it brings it forward into our world.

In like manner the sacraments, and here we will focus exclusively on the Supper, have an eschatological character. We have seen, in Luke 22:14 ff., how the institution of the Supper is linked to the eschatological gift of the kingdom. In 1 Cor. 11:26 the full temporal aspect of our ecclesial ambiguity is enacted. “For, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” The Supper, like the whole of the church’s life, brings the end forward. It is the proleptic participation in the eschatological banquet of the kingdom (Mt. 26:29).

But the relation, as with the Word, is not a flat, two-stage, symbolic anticipation. “The relation between the eucharist and eating and drinking in the kingdom of God is not merely
that between symbol and reality, but that between commencement and fulfillment.” Just as the keys are the keys of the eschatological kingdom, the marks are the marks of the eschatological church, the instrument of that kingdom. Here the temporal dimension must be fully embraced. “In a word, it is the meal in which ‘the powers of the world to come’ have been released in Christ’s coming, and in which the ‘heavenly gift’ and the Holy Spirit have been given and ‘tasted.’” It is part and parcel of this gift of the age to come that the judgment itself is brought forward: “For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:31-32). Thus, “the eucharist is also a place that transcends time. On the one hand, it is an anamnesis, a remembrance, a recalling of Christ, but on the other hand it is also – paradoxically – an anamnesis of the future, a remembering of things to come.”

As we pointed out when we looked at Calvin’s solution to the real absence of Jesus’ bodily presence in his doctrine of the Supper, he works the whole problem out in terms of space and neglects the time dimension. We need to clarify that here and show its implications. First, Calvin has a robust and dynamic doctrine of the ascension. The three benefits our faith receive from it are; first, it understands that the Lord has opened the way to the heavenly kingdom, second, that He abides as our advocate in heaven, and third, that, by

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258 Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 412.

259 Ibid., 413.

His Spirit, He nurtures and defends the church, “until, in coming to judge the living and the dead, He accomplishes His final act.”

The Spirit solves the absence created by the ascension, and thus creates an eschatological dynamism, but, as the allusion to the “final act” shows, what is not emphasized is its commencement. The time of the end seems to be held in reserve, though, of course, not consistently so due to the Spirit’s presence. This flatness is confirmed in that Milner’s whole thesis is that, for Calvin, the church is the history of the restoration of the world. This is fine if the history of the world to come gives this restorative history its full ambiguity.

For Calvin, as we have seen, the marks are correlated to the Word and Spirit and work only in response to a living faith. This correlation differs from both Zwinglian memorialism and Roman identity and the reason for its importance to Calvin is that the Spirit is always free. So we can say that his eucharistic doctrine is driven by both Christological concerns (real bodily absence and the retention of full human properties) and Pneumatological ones (the freedom of the Spirit), but the eschatological vector is attenuated.

However, given the structure of Calvin’s ecclesiology the eschatological could never be obliterated. The whole conception of the church as an achievement of the Spirit in Word and sacraments is in a basic way eschatological. We would contend that Calvin’s theological instincts show themselves wonderfully when he teaches, in what has become a standard

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261 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.16.

262 Milner, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church*, 47.
Reformed affirmation, that the efficacy of the sacraments is not tied to the *time* of their administration.263

Nonetheless, the deficiency is seen in that Calvin ties this to the freedom of the Spirit, not to the ambiguity and complexity created by the time of the age to come entering our time. So, even in the marks of the church, we feel Calvin’s polemic against apriorism and Rome’s inclination to possess or control the Word and sacraments, could be assisted be extending his conceptions along the temporal eschatological axis. From this perspective the doctrine of transubstantiation is an “annihilation of the ascension” not only spatially, but temporally. As such it is a mini-Parousia, an over-realization which disrupts the eschatological balance of the sacraments.

**Applying the Sursum Corda to Ecclesiology**

This brings us to our final area of reflection, which we believe suggests itself in our analysis of the marks above. The question here is just how might Calvin’s doctrine of the eucharist aid in his polemic against the papacy if it were worked out more robustly in terms of time and not simply space. Doing this has, as we said in the introduction, a prima facie plausibility. Since the eucharist is a place where the church visibly manifests itself as the one body of Christ by means of union with the body of the ascended Lord, its ecclesial importance is enormous. Any question of order must ask must examine itself in light of the order manifested in the church’s eucharistic participation in Christ as His body. In the nature of the case we offer only some preliminary suggestions.

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Calvin says, provocatively, that there is a continual participation in the flesh of Christ in the life of the church. Commenting on John six, he writes “this sermon does not refer to the Lord’s Supper, but to the continual communication which we have apart from the reception of the Lord’s Supper.…He is now treating of the perpetual eating of faith.”264 This statement virtually invites us to explore the extension of Calvin’s eucharistic theology to the whole life of the church.

Let us first recall that the church is an eschatologically oriented community. As the creation of the Spirit, who is the firstfruits and guarantee of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14, Rom. 8:17, 23-24; Jas. 1:18), her “present participation in the Trinitarian communion through faith in Jesus Christ anticipates in history the eschatological communion of the church with the triune God.”265 Note the dialectic: participation and anticipation. Thus the church’s life and, indeed her unity, come from beyond her, from the eschaton, the new order of the Spirit, the powers of which were manifested in the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4).

This means the church is a heavenly reality. Her being is thus not determined by our space or our time. O’Brien comments on Eph. 1:3 and the assertion that all our blessedness resides in the heavenly realms in Christ: “In the heavenly realms is bound up with the divine saving events and is to be understood within a Pauline eschatological perspective. In line with the Jewish two-age structure heaven is seen from the perspective of the age to come, which has now been inaugurated by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time it is still part of this present evil age until the final consummation, for hostile


265 Wolf, After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity, 129.
powers are currently active in the heavenly realms (cf. 3:10, 6:12)...believers are incorporated into Him who is Himself in the heavenly realm.”

Notice here that the heavenly existence of the church means the engagement of the hostile powers as we noted in our discussion of the keys. Nevertheless, the powers are subject to Christ and His heavenly presence is now determinative of believers existence (Eph. 2:5-6, Col. 3:1-4) who are already raised and seated with Christ.

Thus the church, construed catholically, is understood “metaphorically of a heavenly gathering around Christ in which believers already participate (cf. Heb. 12-22-24).” She is the Jerusalem from above (Gal 4:26). Heaven is the locus of her life and her warfare (Eph. 3:10). Her citizenship is in heaven from which she eagerly awaits a Savior (Phi. 3:20). The whole of the church’s life then is one continual Sursum Corda in which space is mysteriously collapsed. Time in the same way is transcended. As we have seen in Revelation twenty one, the church comes down out of heaven. She does not come linearly into the future from the past. She is pulled, not pushed into the future. The time of the future invades “crumbling

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267 Ibid., 141, 145.

268 Ibid., 146-147.

269 Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 461. “Paul tells the Philippians that they belong to a heavenly commonwealth, that is, their state and constitutive government is in heaven.”

time” and drags the church toward the eschaton. Of course all of these texts have about them an eschatological reserve as well, but the substantial reality must be fully confessed.

Let us apply these truths to the Roman papal claims. Recall, we can think in terms of three affirmations. First, the pope, as Christ’s vicar, is the head of the church on earth. Second, he is the visible source of the church’s unity. Third, he possesses the charism of doctrinal infallibility under the conditions delineated by Vatican I. All of these claims are regularly grounded in the need for such in the church’s visible, historical existence.

First, the heavenly reality of the church’s existence and its continual participation in the ascended Christ lead us to assert that the Roman claim that the historical church needs a vicar and visible head distorts the eschatological balance in the following way. In attempting to compensate for the “not yet” created by the ascension it has an under-realized sense of the “already” of the reality of the church’s heavenly existence in Christ, who, while held in eschatological reserve is, nevertheless, because of the presence of the Spirit, not only not absent, but has indeed lifted the whole of the church up “already” into a heavenly existence. This under-realization is dialectically compensated for with an over-realized instantiation in our fallen time and earthly space of a “vicar” for Christ.

Much the same analysis can be applied to the other Roman claims. The church’s unity, manifested in the eucharist can be, as we have attempted to show, extended to her entire ecclesial existence. Thus, at the table, as in her life generally, she partakes really and truly of Christ and manifests, proleptically to be sure, a heavenly, eschatological unity. In the structure of this unity the many people flow “upward” in space and “forward” in time to the one Christ. This is ministerially represented in the many pastors in the one corporate episcopate
flowing to the one Pastor and Bishop of souls. Any pyramid notions\textsuperscript{271} disrupt this order. In fact, the Roman bishop as guarantor of ecclesial unity reduces to there being two bishops in every church.\textsuperscript{272}

Christ exercises His headship, which is the source of the church’s unity, directly and immediately in her eucharistic life by Word and sacrament. He judges and comforts and unites His people at the table. Again, the “not yet” is overcompensated for because of an under-realization of the church’s heavenly and eschatological union with Christ.

Finally, the same rationale applies to the need for an infallible teacher office. Christ, with all the caveats we have adduced, infallibly teaches and judges His church by Word and sacrament, of which the ministry, as we have seen, can only be a servant. An infallible papacy mitigates both the real, substantial authority of this teaching and its eschatological reserve.

\textsuperscript{271} The term is Zizioulas’, \textit{Being As Communion}, 139.

\textsuperscript{272} See John D. Zizioulas, \textit{Eucharist, Bishop, Church} (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), 89 ff.
CHAPTER 9

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

What might our thesis mean for the church as she exists today on the ground? At the outset we remark that all theology is application\(^{273}\) and a good deal of thinking and theologizing about the church is a practical need in this day of ecclesial chaos. Let us suggest some areas in need of further exploration. If what we have said concerning the eschatological future being determinative of the church’s life is substantially correct, then what is needed is to give an account of the historical nature of the church’s continuity. What precisely is the nature of the historical face which the future imprints upon the present experience of the church? If ministerial succession can have no apriori status then precisely what historical landmarks and doctrinal formulations must we hold in order to avoid schism? We do not want to imply that eschatology obliterates or marginalizes history, indeed it creates it.

Concretely our reflections point, at least in a prima facie way, in two directions. The first is, we hope, an inducement to greater charity and real catholicity. If the church is the anticipatory commencement of the eschatological people of God then all whom we expect to be in that final assembly ought to be embraced in love and Christian affection. We need, by God’s grace, to think and work the unity of the future, already prolepticly given (Eph. 4:1-6), back into the present divisions. This future to present vector should be a great inducement to humility with respect to one’s own tradition and landmarks and a genuine openness to other streams of the church’s life.

The second area our conclusions point to is a more full-orbed Reformed approach to the ministry, the keys and the marks. If, in all these areas, we have historically rejected Roman sacerdotalism as well as Anabaptist egalitarianism, here we gain fresh eschatological reasons for those convictions. We must esteem the ministry, its use of the keys and the marks of the church as means of grace. They are gifts of the ascended Christ and are instruments of the “already” given eschatological Spirit. Though it be in “earthen vessels,” the ministry and its work must be seen as bringing us face to face with the God whose kingdom has come.

Yet, esteem must never become a noose. Though we cherish the landmarks left by the Spirit, we must beware of a “Romanizing” apriorism given to our favorite historical symbols and ministries. There is an eschatological reserve or ambiguity which applies not simply to Roman government but to the whole of the church’s life. The “not yet” means that while we have light, we nonetheless see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12). There is an acute provisional dimension to all human and ecclesial judgments before the end (1 Cor 4:5). The church lives by openness to the future the Lord is bringing, which in turn means an intense, self-critical listening to the Word of God in Scripture.

Further theological reflection, especially on the church’s historical continuity, charity and humility, a high but chastened esteem for the ministry, and an openness to the Word of the ascended Christ, who, in Scripture, calls us forward to the consummation; these we hope will be the fruits, however small, of our study.
Calvin, in critiquing the Roman system generally, and the papacy in particular, engages in a critique which, while colored by history and Reformation era polemics at many points, still maintains great theological and exegetical vitality. His biblical exposition of the supremacy of Christ, the authority of His Word, and the ecclesiological landmarks laid down in this light are still decisive for the Reformed tradition. His correlation of the biblical Word and the Holy Spirit with the marks of preaching and sacraments in the church give us a dynamic ecclesiology of the living body of Christ the ascended Lord. All that we have said here depends upon and, we believe, can operate within his broader biblical ecclesiology.

Yet, we have offered some criticism and suggested some corrections. Perhaps a few contours could be drawn differently and a few lines added. This is not meant as a denigration of the inheritance Calvin has left us. We are all his heirs, and we serve the tradition best by critically and respectfully engaging it. While we are in basic agreement with Calvin, we have tried to show that a more fully biblical understanding of the eschatological ramifications of the ascension, especially with respect to the time dimension, can greatly help his polemic. Here the apostolate, the keys, the ministry, the marks and the church’s existence as the body of Christ are cast in a more thoroughgoing eschatological hue.

At nearly every point Calvin’s conclusion are our conclusions. Yet, we have sought only to provide a more satisfying, and we think more architecturally basic way, to make the same critiques. We believe that we have traced out lines of thought that are necessary in the
ongoing polemic with Rome. Where we have done this it has often been Calvin himself, in the Institutes and the commentaries, who has pointed the way. His robust Christology, his doctrine of the ascension and his pneumatic understanding of the church and the eucharist are what suggested our thesis.

To the extent that many of our insights come from times later than Calvin’s, we thank God for them and we gladly use them as Calvin’s heirs and without impugning him for being a theologian who had his own pressing issues to address. Our goal is to help advance a Calvinistic and Reformed ecclesiology in its engagement with Rome.

If we have succeeded in more fully integrating the eschatological tensions created by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus into Calvin’s thought the conclusions are obvious. In a fundamental way, the papacy’s claims to be a vicariate of Christ on earth, a visible source of unity in our space and time and a guarantee of infallible dogma are false. They represent a disruption in the eschatological balance, in all cases ending in an over-realization due to an overemphasized Christological absence and an underestimation of the reality of the church’s heavenly and eschatological existence.
Reference List


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