

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 10 • Number 4 • Fall 2001

Even within the confines of the visible unreformed church there have remained vestiges of the true catholic church, like a half-hearted building (*Institutes*, Book 4, 2:11-13). Thus “the visible church which is also catholic” has an element of continuity through all times. Calvin with Cyprian and Augustine calls the visible church the mother of believers, who, he says, are conceived in her womb, nourished at her breast, guided and instructed by her throughout life. While we recognize that not all who within it make profession of their faith are truly of the faithful, we are to exercise “judgment of charity” among them.

JOHN T. MCNEILL

The whole gospel is contained in Christ.

JOHN CALVIN

THE PASTOR'S GLORY AND CROWN: CALVIN ON THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH, REVISITED

T. M. Moore

Reformed theology identifies the presence of the church where three distinguishing marks are in evidence. As Edmund Clowney notes, “Three marks were defined in distinguishing a true church of Christ: true preaching of the Word; proper observance of the sacraments; and faithful exercise of church discipline.”¹ This distinction traces back to Calvin, who, although he mentions only two marks,² includes the exercise of discipline as part of the ministry of Word and sacraments and states concerning any particular church, “If it has the ministry of the Word and honors it, if it has the administration of the sacraments, it deserves without doubt to be held and considered a true church.”³ Immediately Calvin reinforces this idea of the marks of the church: “We have laid down as distinguishing marks of the church the preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments.”⁴ In the next section he writes, “If in Word and sacraments [a church] has the order approved by the Lord, it will not deceive; let us, then, confidently pay to it the honor due to churches.”⁵ And immediately thereafter, “The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist.”⁶ Calvin, it would seem, was emphatic that these two marks—broken out into three by subsequent Reformed theologians—are the critical identifiers of a true and faith-

ful church. In the preparation and practice of ministers, therefore, Reformed congregations have laid great emphasis on preaching and the disciplined administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as of supreme importance in the calling and constitution of the church. All over the world for the past four-and-a-half centuries, Reformed churches have held up these marks as ideals for aspirants to and practitioners of the gospel ministry, who have diligently applied themselves to these disciplines above all others, and are quick to congratulate themselves on having thereby preserved the true church against all pretenders.

The question immediately arises, therefore, as to why Reformed congregations seem very often to manifest so little of the vitality of life, joy of hope, commitment to mission, passion for souls, exuberance of worship, and divine unity one might expect where the Body of Christ was truly alive and flourishing. Among many observers beyond their pale, Reformed churches have a reputation as being dour, stodgy, pedantic, lethargic or even complacent in mission, and prone to judgmentalism and schism. It is ironic that those churches which hold themselves to be the supreme observers of the marks of the true church are typically regarded by other believers and non-believers alike in a completely different light.

This article will argue that, among the many reasons why Reformed churches so often fail to reflect the ideal of ecclesiastical vitality that characterized the first Christian congregations, a misunderstanding of the marks of the church is a primary cause of our ineptness, and that that misunderstanding can be traced back to a failure to read Calvin—and the Old and New Testaments—in a full and proper light. I hope to show that our focus primarily on what I shall call the *operative* aspect of these marks lies at the root of our problem. Until we recover a fuller view of

the marks of the church, one that includes both *operative* and *receptive* aspects, we shall continue to focus the weaponry of our labors through only one of the needed sights. I will show that Calvin himself was not as sharply focused as he might have been in his own thinking about the marks of the church. As a result, his repeated emphasis on preaching and the sacraments as the indicators of a true church has been seized upon by subsequent generations of Reformed theologians, pastors, and church members in a less than complete manner.

At the same time, I hope to show that by revisiting Calvin's teaching on the marks of the church with a somewhat broader focus, we may come to understand his view of those identifiers in a more complete and energizing light. Revisiting Calvin we will see that, in his mind, the marks of the church include both *operative* and *receptive* aspects, and that a proper understanding of the marks of the church can only be achieved when both these sights are aligned as we squeeze the triggers of our spiritual weaponry. The target of a true church cannot be hit by sighting through one end of the barrel alone; for ministers and lay leaders to collaborate for healthy, growing churches, both sights—the *operative* and *receptive*—must be diligently scrutinized and carefully aligned in all we do.

We will look first, therefore, at what I am calling the *operative* aspect of the marks of the church, beginning with Calvin and looking briefly at other expressions of these in the Reformed tradition. Then we will consider Calvin's rather more scattered thoughts about the *receptive* aspect of those marks and attempt to flesh that aspect out more fully as it appears in his writings. Finally, I will suggest a revised definition of the marks of the church and lead us to consider some ways of recovering the *receptive* aspect of those marks with as much diligence as we have sought to preserve the *operative*.

THE OPERATIVE ASPECT OF THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

By the term, *operative aspect*, I mean what I suspect most Reformed pastors understand by the practice they and their church leaders make of the ministry of the Word and the administration of the sacraments and church discipline. The *operative* aspect of the marks of the church refers to *what pastors and elders do* in employing these ordinances within the life of the congregation. This relates to such disciplines as sermon preparation and delivery, the regular administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, use of the words of institution in the sacraments, "fencing the table," and the systematic use of church discipline according to its hierarchic nature. To their credit, Reformed congregations tend to be rather more scrupulous in each of these areas than many other churches.

Calvin established a pattern of diligence in all these areas which subsequent generations have been careful to observe. His approach to the *operative* aspect of the marks of the church can scarcely be faulted. Let us briefly consider the use Calvin made of the ministry of the Word and the administration of the sacraments and church discipline.

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

In four ways Calvin showed himself diligent in the conduct of the ministry of the Word of God. First, he *faithfully modeled* this ministry, both for his colleagues and for subsequent generations of ministers and teachers. Preaching and teaching were the primary elements of Calvin's ministry. During his ministry in Geneva he expounded the Word of God in preaching and theological lectures as many as twelve times a week.⁷ Cottret writes, "For Calvin, therefore, preaching was not just one literary genre among others; it was the very essence of the Reformation."⁸ Calvin's colleagues, students, and flocks had ample opportunity to

benefit from the model of ministering the Word he provided. While he was often involved in settling ecclesiastical disputes, giving pastoral advice and counsel, participating in acts of discipline and the visitation of local churches, dealing with heretics and those who gainsaid his ministry, and even raising funds for aspects of his work, Calvin never neglected the faithful and consistent ministry of the Word through preaching and teaching. He had little time to prepare for individual messages; rather, his entire life was one of preparation, out of which came the many sermons, commentaries, and theological tracts that took up much of his work in Geneva.

He further modeled this important work through the publication of his sermons and commentaries. Most of these were the work of amanuenses, who took down his words and prepared them, with Calvin's review and approval, for publication, and they remain as reliable examples of Reformed exegesis and hermeneutic for preachers and teachers today. His catechism, prepared to guide elders and parents in raising children and new believers in the rudiments of the faith, is another means whereby Calvin modeled a faithful ministry of the Word of God.

Second, Calvin guarded the ministry of the Word by *limiting* it to specific individuals. He acknowledged two primary offices of the Word—those of preacher and teacher.⁹ Whether in their public ministry of preaching or their private work of counseling and advising, pastors were to be careful to minister the Word of God only.¹⁰ Teachers—or "doctors"—served alongside the ministers, having all the same duties in the Word but excluded from administering the sacraments. They also bore primary responsibility for the instruction of the young.¹¹ All who held the office of teaching—whether ministers or "doctors"—were to be carefully prepared and consistently monitored, lest their teaching should begin to depart from the faithful way

entrusted to them. Pretenders to the ministry of teaching were scrupulously guarded against and, when necessary, disciplined by the Company of Pastors. Not just anyone could take up this work. The *operative* aspect of this mark of the church required, in Calvin's mind, both an inward call and an outward confirmation of that call on the part of those holding the office of minister of the Word.

Third, as suggested above, Calvin insisted that those who sought the office of pastor or doctor *should be carefully prepared*, both through formal instruction and gradual involvement in the work of teaching.¹² Calvin often allowed aspirants to the ministry to attach themselves to him for a time, during which they would consort with him publicly and privately, benefit from his teaching and elaboration, and be given opportunity to exercise the gifts that God was developing in them. Calvin was careful, when, in his absence, such men took his place in the pulpit, to receive a report on their work, and equally careful in communicating back to them words of encouragement or correction.¹³

Fourth, Calvin insisted that the preaching and teaching of the Word of God by those called to office *should be carefully and regularly monitored*. This was the task of the Company of Pastors, who both approved the call of pastors and teachers and stood in the midst of their peers or endured church visitations from them for periodic review of their own preaching.¹⁴ When reports were received by the Company of possible problems in preaching or teaching by members of their ranks, those members were called to account, being required to deliver a message or stand for examination on specific matters, as the Company deemed necessary.

The history of Reformed churches has followed similar practices as Calvin in guarding the *operative* aspect of the ministry of the Word, setting forth careful criteria for preaching, putting forward faithful servants and their work,

and diligently preparing men for the ministry of the Word, primarily as pastors. Reformed statements of faith, such as *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, reflect this high sense of the importance of the ministry of the Word of God (Q and A 159):

How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?

They that are called to labour in the ministry of the word are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

The ordination requirements of Reformed denominations typically reflect a concern that those entrusted with the ministry of the Word be able to conduct the *operative* aspect of this mark in a manner consistent with the example of Calvin and the tradition of our Reformed forebears.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS AND THE EXERCISE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Calvin was equally scrupulous in attending to the proper administration of the sacraments and the exercise of church discipline. We see this in two ways. First of all, in *Calvin's own practice*. From the beginning of his ministry in Geneva (1536) Calvin insisted on an absolute linkage between the practice of church discipline and the administration of the sacraments. He often explained his practice so that others could understand the role of these elements

in the work of the church and be encouraged to follow his lead. Various of his letters, as well as the record of the Company of Pastors, provide numerous examples of Calvin's approach to dealing with matters of discipline, which he is careful to spell out in *The Institutes* and the *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. He also recorded his manner of administering the Supper for all to review. Writing to Farel from Strasbourg in 1540, Calvin explained his practice of preparing for the Lord's Supper as follows:

When the day of the sacrament of the Supper draws nigh, I give notice from the pulpit that those who are desirous to communicate must first of all let me know; at the same time I add for what purpose, that it is in order that those who are yet uninstructed and inexperienced in religion may be better trained; besides, that those who need special admonition may hear it; and lastly, that if there be any persons who may be suffering under trouble of mind they may receive consolation.¹⁵

He clarified the proper administration of the sacraments, following his own practice, in various of his writings, including *The Institutes*, the *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, the *Treatise on the Lord's Supper*, and the *Summary of Doctrine concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments*. Thus Calvin was careful to leave no doubt as to his views and practice with respect to the sacraments and church discipline, which Reformed theologians have always recognized as, in the main, exemplary of sound biblical procedure.

Second, Calvin diligently, even heroically, *guarded the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline*, carefully linking these and resisting the efforts of civil magistrates to wrest authority from the leadership of the church over either area. Indeed, it was Calvin's defiance of the city

council, in his refusal to administer the Lord's Supper in what he regarded as a premature manner, that was the occasion of his expulsion from Geneva in 1538. From time to time throughout his subsequent ministry in that city Calvin had to strive with the city fathers over this matter, arguing and even threatening that the Word of God reserved the exercise of discipline and the administration of the sacraments to the pastors of the churches.

Among the theological heirs of Calvin, the proper administration of the sacraments and the exercise of church discipline have always been primary areas of concern. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, for example, devotes four of its thirty-three chapters to these matters. Reformed denominations reserve the exercise of discipline and the administration of the sacraments to ordained ministers of the Word, working with ruling elders in a subsidiary role.

Thus, again, insofar as the *operative* aspect of administering the sacraments and church discipline is concerned—what ministers and church leaders are to understand and do—both Calvin and his heirs in the Reformed tradition can scarcely be faulted. From time to time cries can be heard for more rigor and faithfulness in the exercise of church discipline; however, every Reformed confession and book of ecclesiastical order is careful to spell out what is required in this matter, and aspirants to the ministry are carefully examined concerning their knowledge and understanding of discipline, as of the sacraments.

When we examine Calvin, and those who follow in his heritage, with respect to the *operative* aspect of the marks of the church, we find them in agreement as to the Reformed tradition's understanding of the teaching of Scripture. From Calvin to the present, care and diligence in ministering the Word, overseeing the practice of church discipline, and administering the sacraments have been hallmarks of faithful Reformed teaching and practice.

THE RECEPTIVE ASPECT OF THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

In a letter to Nicholas Parent, cited above, Calvin wrote, "As, however, a well-ordered church is the pastor's glory and crown, even so he can neither exult nor rejoice in anything regarding it, except in so far as the salvation of souls is concerned." He explained that the "order" he had in mind consisted of "the entireness of the flock of Christ [being] kept together in a body", with believers experiencing more of the salvation of the Lord. A minister could only exult and rejoice in his ministry when such results were in evidence. The "order" Calvin sought for the churches under his care, in other words, had a specific *result* or *character* in view.

Here it seems that Calvin's understanding of a true church is qualified by something more than the *operative* aspect of the marks of the church alone. A "well-ordered church" is not simply one where the Word is preached and the sacraments and discipline are employed, but one that demonstrates fruit, one in which the proper *operative* use of the marks of the church brings forth specific indicators of genuine faith on the part of those who benefit from that use. Concerning the ministry of the Word and the exercise of discipline and administration of the sacraments, properly adhered to, Calvin wrote, "These can never exist without bringing forth fruit and prospering by God's blessing."¹⁶ Not necessarily *immediately*, "but wherever [the Word] is *received* and has a fixed abode, it shows its effectiveness."¹⁷ This was no cry for perfectionism; rather, Calvin seems to have been insisting that proper *operative* use of the marks of the church, as Reformed theology has historically understood them, *must necessarily issue in growing Christians and growing churches* where those ministries are properly received.

Thus, we would expect Calvin to prescribe some *recep-*

tive aspect of the marks of the church as well, some actions or results on the part of those for whom the Word, sacraments, and discipline are employed that expresses a true church. And he does. Calvin wrote¹⁸ that a false church does not *hear* the Word of God, be it ever so faithfully preached. In his earlier words, a false church does not "honor" the Word. The minister may be exegetically sound, doctrinally clear, homiletically beyond reproach; but if the congregation is not listening and receiving the Word as it should, no true church will be found. A true preacher may, indeed, be at work; but a true church has yet to appear. A true temple of God, Calvin wrote, is one where the Word of God "is heard and scrupulously obeyed."¹⁹ He elaborated on this in his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* and in the tract, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. In these treatises Calvin shows what "fruit" we should expect when the Word of God is faithfully preached and taught. In the *Catechism* the master asks concerning the Word of God, "How should it be used to obtain profit from it?" To which the catechumen replies:

If we lay hold on it with complete heartfelt conviction as nothing less than certain truth come down from heaven; if we show ourselves docile to it; if we subdue our wills and minds to his obedience; if we love it heartily; if having it once engraved on our hearts and its roots fixed there, so that it bring forth fruit in our life; if finally we be formed to this rule—then it will turn to our salvation, as intended.²⁰

His elaboration on this "fruit" is rather more extensive in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. By the preaching of the Word,

men are incited to reverence his majesty, render due homage to his greatness, feel due gratitude for his mercies, and unite

in showing forth his praise. In this way there is infused into their hearts that solid confidence which afterwards gives birth to prayer. In this way too each one is trained to genuine self-denial, so that his will being brought into obedience to God, he bids farewell to his own desires. In short, as God requires us to worship him in a spiritual manner, so we with all zeal urge men to all the spiritual sacrifices which he commends.²¹

He continues with an explanation of his purposes in the preaching of the Word:

Our writings are witnesses, and our sermons also, how frequent and sedulous we are in recommending true repentance, urging men to renounce their reason, their carnal desires, and themselves entirely, that they may be brought into obedience to God alone, and live no longer to themselves but to him. Nor indeed do we overlook external duties and works of charity, which follow on such renewal. This, I say, is the sure and unerring form of divine worship, because it is the form which his Word prescribes.²²

Edmund Clowney observed of Calvin's view of the ministry of the Word:

A preacher proclaiming the gospel in a market-place does not fulfill the New Testament description of the church, however. As Calvin affirms, the gospel must be heard and heeded as well as proclaimed. There must be a community of believers showing the root of faith in the fruit of love.²³

The writers of *The Westminster Larger Catechism* were also sensitive to the duty of hearers of the Word to take it sincerely to heart and life (Q and A 160):

What is required of those that hear the word preached?

It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

In a true church, therefore, the ministry of the Word is faithfully received and results in the people of God receiving gifts for loving ministry, so that the members of the church "grow together among themselves; thus are we all brought into the unity of Christ, if prophecy flourishes among us, if we receive the apostles, if we do not refuse the doctrine administered to us."²⁴

Calvin anticipated similar results from the disciplined administration of the sacraments. In his *Treatise on the Lord's Supper* he wrote,

For this reason, the Lord instituted for us his Supper, in order to sign and seal in our consciences the promises contained in his gospel concerning our being made partakers of his body and blood; and to give us certainty and assurance that in this consists our true spiritual nourishment; so that, having such an earnest, we might entertain a right assurance about salvation. Second, for the purpose of inciting us to recognize his great goodness towards us, so that we praise and magnify it more fully. Third, to exhort us to all sanctity and innocence, seeing that we are members of Jesus Christ, and particularly to unity and brotherly charity, as is specially recommended to us. When we have noted well these three reasons, which our Lord imposed in ordaining his Supper for us, we shall be in a position to understand both what benefits accrue to us from it, and what is our duty *in its right use* (emphasis added).²⁵

"Right use" of the sacrament, in Calvin's mind, included the *receptive* mark Calvin summarized above. Teaching and preaching, the sacraments, and church discipline must be *received* by those for whom it is being ministered—received in such a way as to bring forth the evidence of fruit—before a true church can be identified. In a sermon on Ephesians 4:15-16, Calvin gives a crisp summary of what such a church might, in fact, look like:

Thus, in sum what we have to get hold of from this passage is that God will not have us be joined together without knowing how and why, but he will have us to agree to worship him and serve him and to put our whole trust in his infinite goodness, so that Jesus Christ be our Head, and we all members of his body through the power of faith. And again, when once we know that we have a Father in heaven who has adopted us to be his children, and Jesus Christ indeed vouchsafed to take our flesh and manner of living upon him in order that we should be flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone, the same should move us to love one another, to have a mutual care for our salvation, and to help one another according to the ability that God gives us; as also it is said in the psalm that the friendship of brethren is a desirable thing.²⁶

Thus, Calvin implies that the marks of the church are more than that *operative* aspect so often glibly paraded out as the distinguishing feature of churches in the Reformed tradition, namely, that which the pastor and elders do in diligently applying themselves to the marks of the church. A *receptive* aspect, which describes the fruit of those ministries in the lives of the people of the congregation appears also to have been in his mind, and would seem to be implied in the ideas of "true preaching of the Word; proper observance of the sacraments; and faithful exercise of church discipline," to recall Clowney. From Calvin's per-

spective the marks of the church are not to be found only in what the pastor and church leaders do—the *operative* aspect—but in the faithful and fruitful response of the people as well—the *receptive* aspect. This view comports well with the teaching of the Word of God, where the church is portrayed, not in terms of preaching, sacraments, and discipline—which are regarded primarily as *means* to the end of a true church—but as a city set on a hill, a healthy body, a vibrant community, a people with a mission to proclaim the kingdom of Christ to the world.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH, REVISITED

Therefore, I would suggest the following as a definition of the marks of the church more in keeping with Calvin's thinking: The marks of a true church are the faithful preaching and hearing of the Word of God, together with the disciplined and worshipful administration and reception of the sacraments, such that love for God and people is manifest and increasing. This definition accomplishes the following:

- 1) It acknowledges the historic definition of the marks of the church, whether understood in terms of three or two distinguishing marks.
- 2) It retains the important *operative* aspect of the marks of the church, that is, the work of pastors and elders in overseeing their diligent use in a faithful and disciplined manner.
- 3) In the words "hearing" and "reception" it takes account of the responsibilities of the congregation in helping to actualize the reality of a true church ("disciplined" and "worshipful," as modifiers of "reception," apply to leaders and people alike).
- 4) In adding the qualifiers of love for God and people

it takes account of the great commandments of Christ and suggests various biblical images of the church at worship, in community, and in mission.

It seems to me that, taking these as the marks of the church—that is, taking account of both the *operative* and *receptive* aspects of the marks of the church—we focus more clearly on what Calvin intended, as well as what the Scriptures teach, and we establish a benchmark against being content with anything other than growing Christians and healthy, growing churches as the goal of our ministries.

How, then, might we begin to recover a more proper use of the marks of the church, in both their *operative* and *receptive* aspects? While a full response to this question would require another article altogether, I would point in two general directions.

First, in all our undertakings in ministry, pastors and church leaders should be careful to strive for the realization of carefully-articulated and mutually agreed-upon biblical ideals and models for making disciples and growing the church. In our preaching and teaching we must not be content with careful exposition and clear and compelling delivery; rather, we must insist that people hear the Word, repent and believe the gospel, and lay aside their former lives in order to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. We must preach in order to make disciples, not merely to expound a text; administer the sacraments to increase holiness and piety, not merely to fulfill the outward requirements of the ordinance; and discipline for discipleship, not simply to redress wrongs. Our ministries of the Word, sacraments, and discipline will not satisfy the demands of the marks of the church until *all those involved in those ministries—both those who administer and those who benefit from them—evidence the reality of those ministries having impacted their lives for the glory of God.*

To this end our ministries must include clear and concise thinking about the needs of individual church members and the congregation as a whole. Where are the people lacking in their discipleship? In what ways is our church failing to express the biblical ideal of a church? How can this text, this message speak to these needs, and in what specific ways? What focus or concern must I address in leading the congregation to prepare for the Supper, in “fencing the table,” and the use of the words of institution? Such ministries will be bathed in more intense and focused prayer, and will throb with the love of Christ for his needy people. This approach to ministry will bring both more passion and more focus to the *operative* aspect of the marks of the church.

To many readers this will appear as nothing new. They are already thinking in terms of needs, applications, and specific individuals as they undertake the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Still, I would call them to an even sharper focusing of their preparations, that they might prayerfully consider each member of their flock, and the flock as a whole, in the light of the biblical ideals of discipleship and of a healthy, growing church, and that their ministries in these areas might be so consistently focused on these objectives—this fruit—that these ideals become embedded in the thinking and aspirations of the members of the church as well.

Second, I would call for a reviving of the work of shepherding on the part of the elders of the church, so that they might carefully oversee, consistently encourage, and fruitfully edify each member of the Body of Christ in the *receptive* aspect of the marks of the church. The books of order of the various reformed denominations define the work of elders as that of shepherding, of caring for and nurturing each member of the Body of Christ in spiritual growth, so that the entire church may reach unity and maturity in

Christ. But where is this ministry faithfully pursued? In most cases, the work of elders is carried out in committees, on boards, or in a monthly meeting over the business of the church. These works may, indeed, be essential to the well being of the local church, but are they the work of elders?

Jesus taught (John 10) that shepherding, the work to which elders are called (Acts:20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-3), requires relationships of love; spiritual leadership and protection; a careful accounting of all the sheep; nurturing them in the grace and salvation of Christ; sacrificing self-interest for the well being of those in their care; defending the sheep against every threat to their faith and growth; and working diligently to bring other sheep into the flock. Shepherds are to be trusted friends, careful teachers, faithful counselors, exemplars of faith, ardent defenders of the flock, effective disciple-makers, and eager and consistent evangelists. Against such standards as these far too many of the elders of Reformed congregations today simply do not measure up. The Scriptures remind us (Ezekiel 34:1-10) that those shepherds who are delinquent in their calling will be deposed of duty, and their flocks given over to others. That Reformed churches normally lag behind the curve in church growth, and that Reformed church leaders frequently bemoan the flight of members to "seeker-friendly" or other congregations may say as much about our failure as shepherds as it does about the irresponsibility of the sheep. Only a ministry of diligent, loving, sacrificial, prayerful, careful, and consistent shepherding will allow church leaders to exercise the kind of oversight of the *receptive* aspect of the marks of the church that faithfulness in the use of those marks requires.

The marks of the church must not be taken merely as defining the work that church leaders do in carrying out their ministries to the flock. The marks of the church must

also include what church members do, in faith and obedience, to nurture the fruit of those leaders' ministries in their lives. The marks of the church must be defined both *operatively* and *receptively*, or we will always be content with something less than what Calvin—and the Word of God—had in view for the churches we serve.

Author

T. M. Moore serves on the pastoral staff of Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church (EPC), Knoxville, Tennessee. He is also an associate editor for *Reformation & Revival Journal* and the Associate for Ministry Advancement for Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc. T. M. is a poet, writer and theologian who lives with his wife Susie in Concord, Tennessee. He serves as editor of adult publications for Scripture Union and as a theological advisor to Chuck Colson and Prison Fellowship Ministries. His most recent books are *Ecclesiastes* (InterVarsity, 2001) and *Disciplines of Grace* (InterVarsity, 2001).

Notes

1. Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 101. Cf. also L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974), 577-78; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1973), 567.
2. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* seems to follow Calvin in noting two marks of the church, but adds "public worship performed more or less purely" along with the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, XXV.4.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.I.9, 1023-24.
4. *Institutes*, IV.I.10, 1024.
5. *Institutes*, IV.I.11, 1025.
6. *Institutes*, IV.I.12, 1025.
7. See the quote from Beza in Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 288.
8. *Calvin: A Biography*, 295.

9. *Institutes*, IV.III.
10. *Institutes*, IV.III.6, 1059.
11. *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, Edited by J. K. S. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1954), 63.
12. See Calvin's comment on the formation of pastors in *Institutes*, IV.IV.9.
13. Cf. his letters to Nicolas Parent, November 26, 14, and December 14, 1540, in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*. Edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1983), 220 ff.
14. Cf. the numerous examples of this cited in *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*. Edited and translated by Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1966).
15. Calvin, *Selected Works*, 184.
16. *Institutes*, IV.I.10, 1024.
17. *Institutes*, IV.I.10, emphasis added.
18. *Institutes*, IV.II.3.
19. *Institutes*, 1043-44.
20. "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," in *Theological Treatises*, 130.
21. "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Theological Treatises*, 187.
22. "Necessity," 188.
23. *The Church*, 103.
24. *Institutes*, IV.III.2, 1055.
25. "Treatise on the Lord's Supper," in *Theological Treatises*, 144.
26. *John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 390.

The gospel can be understood by faith alone—not by reason, nor by the perspicuity of the human understanding.

JOHN CALVIN

Today no self-respecting historian would seek to perpetuate the details of the crude calumnies that have been invented against the person of Calvin.

PHILIP E. HUGHES

With good reason the ancient proverb strongly recommended knowledge of self to man. For if it is considered disgraceful for us not to know all that pertains to the business of human life, even more detestable is our ignorance of ourselves, by which, when making decisions in necessary matters, we miserably deceive and even blind ourselves.

JOHN CALVIN