

Calvin on Unity and Sexual Immorality

A Comment on a Presbyterian Coalition Document

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In a new Presbyterian Coalition paper, "[Let Us Rise Up and Build \(Neh. 2:18\): A Plan for Reformation in the Presbyterian Church \(USA\)](#)," which I commend as a continuing effort to bring renewal to the PCUSA, Calvin is cited on the question of unity and the case of Corinth:

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book IV, Chapter 1), recites the long history of doctrinal and moral corruption in Israel and the church. He refers to the church in Corinth, where "it was not a few that erred, but almost the whole body had become tainted; there was not one species of sin but a multitude; and these not trivial errors, but some of them execrable crimes" (section 14). Calvin notes that "Paul, instead of giving them [the Corinthian Christians] over to destruction, mercifully extricated them" (section 27). The reformer concludes, "Such, then, is the holiness of the Church: it makes daily progress, but is not yet perfect; it daily advances, but as yet has not reached the goal" (section 17). Our hope is that "the Lord is daily smoothing its [the Church's] wrinkles, and wiping away its spots" (section 2). (p. 5 n. 1)

These references buttress the assertion on p. 2 that "the church always stands in need of reformation" and justify staying in the denomination despite its problems. The comment is made on p. 4: "Even individuals and congregations that move to another Reformed body will soon discover that that body, too, stands in need of biblical reformation." In short, these remarks suggest that affirmation of homosexual unions in the PCUSA would not be grounds for leaving the PCUSA.

In response:

1. *It is not clear to me that Calvin intended to say, in the quotations given above, that believers should remain in a denominational structure indefinitely that blessed incestuous unions between a man and his mother or stepmother, among church officers no less, and did so as part of the doctrine of the church.* Indeed, it strikes me as historically bizarre to suggest that Calvin would long have remained in such a denomination as prospects dimmed for turning the denomination around. The only question, it seems to me, is whether Calvin would have recommended to civil authorities beheading or banishment for offenders. The same question would have applied, indeed more so, to the case of homosexual offenders. (Here, of course, I do not wish to condone either fate but merely suggest that the intensity of Calvin's opposition would have been greater, not lesser, than ours.)

2. Calvin's remarks have to be taken in context. *First, he appears to presume a realistic possibility of repentance on the part of offenders.* Hence his remark in Book IV, ch. 1, sec. 27 (all further references to sections are to Book IV, ch. 1, unless otherwise noted): "Nay, the very persons who had sinned . . . are expressly invited to repentance." This is exactly Paul's expectation in 1 Cor 5. Paul has only just received news of the case of the incestuous man (5:1) and still expects to be able to have an effect on the community. He orders them "in the name of our Lord Jesus . . . to hand over such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (5:4-5), meaning, minimally, that they are not to associate with the offender, "not even to eat together with such a one" (5:9-11). As founder of the community and as supreme apostle to the Gentiles, he feels that he has a reasonable expectation of succeeding in his order. Indeed, it is possible that the reference to restoring quickly a *penitent* offender in 2 Cor 2:5-10 (cf. 7:8-13) alludes to the incestuous man, with whom Paul may have 'had it out' in an intervening visit to Corinth. But Paul also speaks of ongoing "sexual uncleanness, sexual immorality, and sexual licentiousness" that the Corinthians have not repented of, which puts them at risk of not inheriting God's kingdom (2 Cor 12:21; cf. 1 Cor 6:9-10). Such conduct may necessitate a harsh visit by Paul, with ultimatum (2 Cor 13:1-10; cf. 1 Cor 4:18-21).

The situation with the incestuous man that Paul faced at the time that he wrote we today call "1 Corinthians," is very different from a situation extending over decades in which the Corinthians would have not only adamantly refused to submit to Paul's ruling but also installed the incestuous man as a leader of the church and where reconciliation with the teaching of "our Lord Jesus" on incest (implicit teaching, of course, since Jesus did not speak directly against man-mother incest) no longer seemed a reasonable prospect. Under the latter set of circumstances the continuance of the church in the Pauline orbit seems highly unlikely, to say nothing of Paul insisting that believers must continue to submit to the leadership of such a renegade church in the name of "unity." Unity for Paul was a Christological concept, not a sociological concept—unity around the one who was crucified for us and into whose name we were baptized (1:13) and who therefore had a right to be Lord of our lives (5:13; 12:3).

3. *A second contextual factor in Calvin's discussion is that Calvin was primarily thinking of the context of his own 'denomination,'* where he exercised great influence, and *about matters of doctrine and behavior that were not major* and so did not constitute sufficient grounds for leaving the denomination. As regards doctrine he cites the example of whether the soul on leaving the body definitely lives with the Lord or makes no commitment about the soul's abode other than it goes to heaven (sec. 12). As regards behavior, he cites the case of the Anabaptists and others who tolerate no "imperfection of conduct" and "spurn the society of all in whom they see that something human still remains"—what Calvin refers to as "immoderate severity" (sec. 13). He is not thinking of institutional teaching that declares a good what God in Scripture defines as "abhorrent." It is doubtful that Calvin in his day could even have conceived of the possibility of the Church's ordaining persons who were actively and unrepentantly engaged in homosexual practice, so extreme would such a development have been to him. Calvin summarizes his remarks in Book IV, ch. 1 as: "trivial errors

in [the] ministry [of the Church] ought not to make us regard it as illegitimate” and “prevent us from giving the name of Church” (ch. 2, sec. 1).

4. *A third contextual factor is that Calvin does see a place for dissolving denominational ties.* “Who may presume to give the name of Church, without reservation, to that assembly by which the word of God is openly and with impunity trampled under foot. . . ?” (ch. 2, sec. 7). In his own day Calvin viewed dissolution from the Roman Catholic Church as justified by the latter’s adoption of “superstitious worship” in connection with a particular priestly interpretation of the Lord’s Supper. “The communion of the Church ought not to be carried so far by the godly as to lay them under a necessity of following it when it has degenerated to profane and polluted rites” (ch. 2, sec. 9). The PCUSA is currently degenerating into allowing, at least, the “profane and polluted rites” of blessing homoerotic unions and ordaining homosexually-active officers of the church. Calvin rightly notes that “the Church was not instituted to be a chain to bind us in . . . impiety . . . , but rather to retain us in the fear of God and obedience of the truth” (ch. 2, sec. 2). In severing ourselves from churches that promote impiety, Calvin says, “we run no risk of being dis severed from the Church of Christ” (ibid.).

Moreover, Calvin recognized the problem in staying in a denominational structure that would require obedience to that structure’s erroneous teaching. “We cannot concede that they have a Church, without obliging ourselves to subjection and obedience.” He argued that a person will “greatly err” to regard “as churches” the meetings constituting the Roman Catholic Church, which he viewed as “contaminated by idolatry, superstition, and impious doctrine,” since “full communion” requires a certain degree of agreement in doctrine (ch. 2, sec. 10). Although the PCUSA does not currently require ‘subscriptionism’ on the validity of homosexual bonds, it does exert pressure at many different levels to conform to this view, or at least acknowledge the credibility of such a view, if one is to be a ‘player’ holding office on the national and, in some cases, the synod or presbytery levels. The equation of “civil rights” for homosexually active persons with civil rights for African Americans and for women indicates that the current *de facto* local option will not be optional over the long term. No one in the PCUSA church today has the right to refuse candidacy to a woman or to an ethnic minority on the grounds of being a woman or minority. The same will eventually accrue for persons who are homosexually active. Already, in various ways, we find ourselves in positions where we must respect and even submit to church bodies (like the 2006 General Assembly and some judicial bodies in the PCUSA) that are pursuing a homosexual agenda for the church; and to respect the national leadership of a Stated Clerk, and sometimes the Moderator, promoting the homosexual agenda and eviscerating the plain meaning of the Book of Order on ordination standards for sexual behavior in various subtle and not so subtle ways.

It is interesting that Calvin did not declare the “church” from which he separated to have ceased in all respects from being a “church.” “While we are unwilling simply to concede the name of Church to the Papists, we do not deny that there are churches among them. But we contend only for the true state of the Church, implying communion as well as everything which pertains to the profession of our Christianity” (ch. 2, sec. 12).

5. *A fourth contextual factor is that we live today in an inter-denominational world* where a plethora of valid Christian denominations exist, where the differences within a given denomination are often greater than across denominations, and where, consequently, “changing denominations” no longer has the significance that it once had. Today Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Pentecostals, to say nothing of Roman Catholics and persons belonging to the various Orthodox churches, are by choice of denomination necessarily “divided” from other Christians, at least in an institutional way. This is different from the regional sway held by reformed churches of Calvin’s day and the relatively limited array of options for going elsewhere. When I came to Pittsburgh thirteen years ago as an American Baptist and joined the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—nobody in the PCUSA accused me of violating the Scripture’s commands on church unity, even though there were (and are) American Baptist churches in the area.

So the issue that the renewal movements in the PCUSA must face is not *whether* there are justifiable grounds for leaving a denomination but rather *on what grounds* departure would be justifiable. In answering this question one should take the following syllogism into consideration:

- A **MAJOR PREMISE**
A denomination renders itself illegitimate when, through enactment, it willfully ordains persons actively involved in adult incest, adultery, polyamory, or like acts, and blesses sexual unions constituted by such behavior.
- B **MINOR PREMISE**
Homosexual practice is, according to Scripture, at least as bad as—and probably worse than—adult incest, adultery, and polyamory.
- C **CONCLUSION**
A denomination renders itself illegitimate when, through enactment, it willfully ordains homosexually active persons and blesses homosexual unions.

When we compare the current and soon-to-happen circumstances of the PCUSA to the problems that will beset those who leave the PCUSA for more orthodox bodies—even if only to make the comparison at the point of ongoing “need of biblical reformation” (p. 4)—we do an injustice to the foundational importance that Scripture attaches to having sexual bonds consist only of “male and female” and, conversely, the abhorrence with which Scripture’s authors treat homosexual practice of any sort. In short, we underestimate the sacred importance of what is now seriously endangered in the PCUSA.

The current “Let Us Rise Up and Build” document does the renewal movement of the PCUSA a disservice if it does not address the elephant in the room; namely, what constitutes legitimate grounds for departure in the PCUSA. This question is on the minds not of those who have already left—for them it is no longer a question. It is foremost a question for those

who remain. The actions of the General Assembly one year from now could well render the entire strategy of this report irrelevant. We must now, and not next year, begin to address the “what if?”

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