“Would John Calvin Stay in the Episcopal Church?”

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Readers of this article in the Episcopal Church may rightly ask, “Why should we care about what John Calvin would think about the current problems in the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican communion? He lived in the sixteenth century, and we live in the twenty-first; and he was a Presbyterian anyway, not an Anglican.” The reason why the question posed in the title is of interest to Episcopalians asking themselves, in the midst of the current battles over human sexuality and biblical authority, “Should we go, or should we stay?”, is that John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian tradition, and Cranmer and the English Reformers, founders of the historic Anglican tradition, both shared a common view of the church: they were “catholic” and not “separatist” in their ecclesiology. They saw themselves as attempting to bring into being a *reformed catholic church –* not to start a new “denomination.”

The answer to the question posed in the title above, is, in short, “Yes, Calvin would encourage evangelicals in the Episcopal Church (and in other mainline denominations such as the PCUSA) to stay in, to maintain an evangelical witness, and to work for renewal.” The reasons in support of this conclusion can be seen by examining Calvin’s discussion of the unity of the visible church in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Bk. IV, ch.1.9-21, “Means of Grace: Holy Catholic Church.”

Calvin cites the example of the Old Testament prophets, who at times found themselves to be a lonely minority in the midst of a theologically and morally corrupted Israel. “Isaiah does not hesitate to liken Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah [Is.1:10]. Religion was in part despised, in part besmirched. In morals one frequently notes theft, robbery, treachery, slaughter, and like evil deeds. Still the prophets did not because of this establish new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which to perform separate sacrifices.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Genevan Reformer also cites the example of Christ and the apostles, who worshipped in the Jerusalem temple, despite the imperfections of the religious leaders of the day: “Even then the desperate impiety of the Pharisees and the dissolute life which commonly prevailed could not prevent them from practicing the same rites along with the people, and from assembling in one temple with the rest for public exercises of religion. How did this happen,” asks Calvin, “except that those who participated in these same rites with a clean conscience knew that they were not at all contaminated by association with the wicked?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jesus cleansed the Temple of money changers (Matt.21:12-17), but did not tell his disciples to abandon its worship or liturgy. Jesus commends the poor widow who makes her financial contribution to the Temple treasury (Lk.21:1-4); Jesus does not consider her expression of faith in God to be contaminated by the personal imperfections of the religious leaders who controlled the Temple. Jesus instructed Peter to find a coin in the fish’s mouth to pay the annual tax required of every Jewish male over the age of twenty, used for the upkeep of the Temple (Matt.17:24-27; Ex.30:13). Jesus expected his disciples to pay taxes to Caesar (Matt.22:21), knowing full well that the personal lives and policies of the Roman emporers were not fully in keeping with the standards of God’s law; nevertheless, the disciples would not be “defiled” by paying the tax.

Jesus was not a “separatist” in relation to the Jewish church of his day. Someone might say, “Jesus had no choice: there were no other ‘denominations’ from which to choose at the time.” This in fact is not quite the case; the community of the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran considered themselves to be the “true Israel” in a “new Covenant” with God. They alone interpreted the Holy Scriptures correctly; they were the ‘final remnant”. They considered the Temple leadership to be apostate and hopelessly corrupt.[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus did not go out into the Judean desert to join the Qumran sectarians, but stayed among the people to bring spiritual renewal by preaching repentance and faith in God. Jesus did not “come out” and separate himself, but became known as the friend of “publicans and sinners”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Strikingly, the apostles and the early Jerusalem church continued to go up to the Jewish temple to pray (Acts 3:1) – to a temple controlled by the party of the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection and the reality of angels and spirits (Acts 23:8). Evidently Peter and John and Paul did not understand the admonition to “come out from them and be separate” (2 Cor.6:17) to require that they separate themselves from the Jewish “national cathedral,” so to speak.[[5]](#footnote-5) The temple, despite its corrupt leadership – Sadducees and priests who had conspired to crucify Jesus – was still a divinely ordained institution, dedicated to the worship of Yahweh, not Baal; the temple liturgy, based on the scriptures of the Old Testament, was still a liturgy that the early Christians could pray without compromising their Christian convictions. The early Jewish Christians continued to attend the Jewish synagogues well into the second century, until changes in the synagogue liturgy – prayers anathematizing the Christians – made it impossible to attend.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In commenting on the apostle Paul’s relationship to the troubled Corinthian church, Calvin notes that among the Corinthians “… no slight number had gone astray; in fact, almost the whole body was infected. There was not one kind of sin only, but very many; and they were no light errors but frightful misdeeds; there was corruption not only of morals but of doctrine. What does the holy apostle . . .do about this? Does he seek to separate himself from such? Does he cast them out of Christ’s kingdom? . . . He not only does nothing of the sort; he even recognizes and proclaims them to be the church of Christ and the communion of saints [1Cor.1:2]! … The church abides among them because the ministry of Word and sacraments remains unrepudiated there.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Calvin, like Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel,[[8]](#footnote-8) and the other English reformers, had a high regard for patristic authority,[[9]](#footnote-9) and, like the fathers, had a “catholic” and not “separatist” or “sectarian” view of the church. Their “catholic” ecclesiology is drawn largely from Augustine and Cyprian. Calvin cites Augustine’s admonition that zeal for the purity of the church should be tempered with charity and mercy: “The godly manner and measure of church discipline ought at all times to be concerned with ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ [Eph.4:3] … Holy scripture bids us correct our brother’s vices with more moderate care, while preserving sincerity of love and unity of peace.” The godly, says Augustine, are to “… correct what they can; bear patiently and lovingly to bewail and mourn what they cannot; until God either amends or corrects or in the harvest uproots the tares and winnows the chaff” [Matt.13:40; 3:12; Lk.3:17].[[10]](#footnote-10) For Augustine, the visible church was a “mixed bag”; only at the end would the Lord of the harvest be able to unerringly separate the wheat from the chaff.

He also cites Cyprian, the North African church father who had a very high view of the unity of the church: “Even though there seem to be tares or unclean vessels in the church, there is no reason why we ourselves should withdraw from the church; rather, we must toil to become wheat; we must strive as much as we can to be vessels of gold and silver.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Having cited Cyprian, Calvin adds further: “First, he who voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the church (where the word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered) is without excuse. Secondly, neither the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Cyprian’s views on the visible unity of the church were worked out against the backdrop of the third century Novationist schism,[[13]](#footnote-13) and Augustine’s in the context of the Donatist schism of the fourth century.[[14]](#footnote-14) The followers of the North African bishop Donatus considered themselves the “one true church,” in distinction from the compromising catholics; they refused to accept as valid the sacramental ministry of bishops who had been ordained by *traditores* – catholic bishops, who during the Decian persecution had yielded to the pressure of the Roman authorities and handed over copies of the holy scriptures. In the context of this controversy Augustine articulated the crucial “catholic” view of the church, in which the validity of the sacrament does not depend on the personal holiness of the minister, but on the words of Christ, who is in fact the true minister of the sacrament.

This Cyprianic-Augustinian view of the church is the historic Anglican view, enshrined in article 26 of the 39 Articles, “Of the Unworthiness of Ministers, which Hindereth not the Effect of the Sacraments”:

Although in the visible church the evil be ever mixed with the good,[[15]](#footnote-15) and sometimes the evil have

chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments, yet forasmuch as they do not the

same in their own name, but in Christ’s, and do minister by his commission and authority, we

may use their Ministry, both in hearing the Word of God, and in receiving the Sacraments. Neither

is the effect of Christ’s ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God’s gifts

diminished from such as by faith, and rightly do receive the Sacraments ministered unto them;

which be effectual, because of Christ’s institution and promise, although they be ministered by

evil men.

Nevertheless, it appertaineth to the discipline of the Church, that inquiry be made of evil ministers,

and that they be accused by those that have knowledge of their offences; and finally, being found

guilty, by just judgment be deposed.

In his response to the Donatists Augustine also observed that one split from the church usually leads to another: the followers of Donatus began feuding among themselves, separating into further factions: the Urbanists, the Claudianists, the Rogatists, and the Maximianists. The Donatist schism was to persist for over a hundred years, troubling the peace of the church. This pattern has been repeated in church history: those who “come out” of the parent body then conclude that the new church is not pure enough, and come out of the new church to form a church purer still.

In the sixteenth century Anabaptists,[[16]](#footnote-16) Baptists, and various independent sects separated from the Church of England and from the Lutheran and Reformed churches on the continent because they judged that the magisterial reformers had not gone far enough in purifiying the church. In modern American church history, J. Gresham Machen and his followers left the mainline Presbyterian Church in the midst of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy, to found in 1936 the Presbyterian Church of America (later renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). Machen and his follower Carl McIntire then had disagreements over biblical interpretation and abstinence from alcohol, and McIntire decided in 1937 to found his own denomination, the Bible Presbyterian Church.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Recent Anglicanism[[18]](#footnote-18) in America has also seen its share of church splits. In 1977 the “Anglican Catholic Church” was formed in response to the Episcopal Church’s revisions to the Book of Common Prayer and the ordination of women to the priesthood.[[19]](#footnote-19) In 1991 about one-third of the churches in the Anglican Catholic Church left to join the “Anglican Church in America”.[[20]](#footnote-20) In 1988 the small Anglican denomination of the “Holy Catholic Church Anglican Rite” was formed, but it now appears that the unity of this small body is threatened by disagreements over questions of Marian devotion, “the place and importance of the Mother of God.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

As the new Anglican Church in North America emerges and organizes itself, time will tell if the various subgroups within the new denomination can maintain unity with one another without the “common enemy” of theological liberalism in the Episcopal Church, or whether historic tensions over the ordination of women, and cleavages between evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics will once again rear their ugly heads. Will there be historic replays of earlier nineteenth and twentieth century battles between evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics in the new denomination over baptismal regeneration, the place of the 39 Articles, the reservation and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the invocation of angels and the saints, Marian devotion, reunion with Rome, and so forth?[[22]](#footnote-22) Will the new denomination have clear answers to such questions as, “By what principle or principles do we decide what Roman Catholic doctrines and practices are acceptable in this denomination? What Roman Catholic beliefs and practices, if any, are excluded?” The ACNA provisional constitution art.I.7 states that “We receive the Thirty-Nine Articles … as expressing fundamental principles [not, “doctrines”] of authentic Anglican belief” – but what exactly are these “fundamental principles,” and where are they specified? Without clear answers to such questions, the Protestant/Anglo-Catholic/Roman Catholic elements that influence the ACNA’s basic identity remain ambiguous, and a potential source of future intramural conflict.

*Some Concluding Thoughts:*

So when all is said and done, what final thoughts might John Calvin have for conservative Episcopalians who are asking themselves, “Should we leave, or should we stay?” I could imagine Calvin saying something like this: “The bottom line is*, stay with the parent body until they eject you or the parent body abandons the Nicene faith*. Be careful in throwing around the term ‘apostate’; distinguish carefully between the beliefs and practices of an individual member of the church; an individual priest; a particular parish; a particular bishop or group of bishops, and the denomination as a whole; distinguish between confessional repudiation of *doctrine* and ecclesiastical failure of *discipline.*  The Augustinian, “catholic” and historic Anglican view of the church would be that the church as a whole, considered as a denomination, remains a viable church of Christ as long as the “Word is preached and the sacraments duly administered,” which in your Episcopal context means, ‘As long as the creeds have not been repudiated, and the Prayer Book expresses in the liturgy the historic orthodox faith.’ You would have to leave if the creeds are repudiated or essentials of the faith removed from the Prayer Book; or: you are either *forbidden* to preach the gospel in your parish, or *commanded* by the bishop to perform practices (e.g., blessing of same-sex unions or same-sex weddings) that you believe violate scripture and your conscience; until that point, stay and preach the gospel, maintain your orthodox witness, and work for renewal.”

Calvin’s ecclesiological advice might sound unrealistic and hopelessly idealistic, especially in our modern American context of individual freedom, “consumer choice” and a “free market” in religion; it is certainly easier to simply leave an unsatisfactory church and shop around for or start another.

Others may say, quite understandably, “We have tried to work for renewal for years – or decades – and it just hasn’t worked.” Fair enough. But on the other hand, did Jesus ever promise his disciples an easy time of being his disciples? Before he prayed his “High Priestly Prayer” for Christian unity (Jn.17:20-23), he had warned his followers that being identified with him would lead to conflict and opposition (Jn.16:1-4). God calls some to remain as faithful “Jeremiahs” in their “Jerusalems” during hard and troubled times.

At the end of the day, some conservative Episcopalians will choose to stay, and others will choose to leave – both for reasons, which seem to them, to be compelling and sound. Even with such an outcome, the spirit of Christ’s prayer for unity could in some measure be answered not in terms of institutional or denominational unity, but at the level of *attitude* and mutual perception. Could both groups in charity recognize one another as fellow Christians? Could both groups perceive each other as acting out of conscience and good faith? Could the “leavers” refrain from seeing the “stayers” as “compromisers”, and the “stayers” refrain from seeing the “leavers” as “schismatics”? So much will depend on attitude and mutual perceptions. Could both groups in a parish[[23]](#footnote-23) caught in the current conflict continue to cooperate with one another in local and global mission, and even have occasions of intercommunion? One might hope so; and upon such a less-than-ideal outcome, one suspects that John Calvin, and more importantly – Jesus Christ – could look with some measure of approbation.

1. *Institutes,* IV.1.18. Citations for the translation of Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Institutes,* IV.1.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 37, 38: “The Religious Ideas of the Community”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The sectarian and separatist impulse in Christianity tends to focus on “truth” at the expense of unity and love; theological liberals tend to focus on love and unity, but at the expense of historic truth. Scripture indicates (e.g. Jn.17: Jesus’ ‘High Priestly Prayer’) that all three values – truth, love, unity - are essential for a healthy and vibrant church. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the context of pastoral issues in Corinth, the plausible context of this statement to “come out and be separate” is the apostles’ earlier admonition (1Cor.10:14-22) for the Corinthian believers to “flee from idolatry” – to avoid active participation in the sacrifices of pagan temples dedicated to Apollo, Asclepius, Demeter, Aphrodite, and the other gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon. They were not morally contaminated by *indirect* contact with idolatrous practices, e.g., meat sacrificed to idols (1Cor.8:1-13); but they would be contaminated by *direct* participation in the temple rituals of the pagan gods (1Cor.10:14-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For background on the so-called “Benediction against the Heretics” (*Birkath ha-Minim*), see James Louis Martin, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp.56ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Institutes,* IV.1.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In his celebrated *Apology for the Church of England* (1562) Bishop John Jewel distinguished the Church of England both from the Roman Catholic Church and from sectarians such as the Anabaptists; the C of E was continuous with the primitive catholic church of Christ, the apostles, and the holy fathers: *Works of John Jewel,* v.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), pp.67, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the high regard for patristic authority by the Anglican divines, see Arthur Middleton, *Fathers and Anglicans: the Limits of Orthodoxy* (Herefordshire, U.K.: Gracewing, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Augustine, *Against the Letter of Parmenianus* III.i.1; III.ii.15; cited by Calvin in *Institutes,* IV.1.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cyprian, *Letters* liv.3, cited by Calvin, *Institutes,* IV.1.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Institutes,* IV.1.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See article on “Novationism,” *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p.968. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See article on “Donatists”, *Catholic Encyclopedia,* accessible online at http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05121.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. the similar statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), chpt.25.5, “Of the Church”: “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error.” Similarly, the Augsburg Confession (1530), chpt.8, “The Church,” states: “Again, although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, ‘The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat’ (Matt.23:2). Accordingly, the Donatists and all who hold contrary views are condemned.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On the sectarian impulse in the Anabaptist tradition, with its search for the “pure New Testament church,” see Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: a Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1964). The English Reformers rejected this sectarian view of the church: see art.26 of the 39 Articles above. Ironically, new Anglican groups in the United States are closer in some aspects of their ecclesiology to the Anabaptist-separatist tradition than to historic Anglicanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For historical background on these Presbyterian controversies and church splits, see: Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: a Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954); Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). For a separatist perspective on these controversies, see Gary G. Cohen, “The Bible Presbyterian Position on Ecclesiastical Separation,” *WRS Journal* 11/2 (August 2004) 5-12, accessed online at <http://www.bpc.org/resources/reading/articles/history/separation1.html>. In the context of current controversies in the Presbyterian Church USA over sexual ethics and biblical authority, Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA urged evangelicals to stay in the denomination: “I worry much about what would happen to Presbyterian evangelicals if we were to leave the PCUSA. When we evangelical types don’t have more liberal people to argue with, we tend to start arguing with each other … the cause of Reformed orthodoxy was diminished when … conservatives … left the mainline denomination. They quickly began to argue among themselves, and it was not long before new splits occurred in their ranks. The result was that conservative Calvinism itself became a fractured movement.”: “Why Conservatives Need Liberals,” *Christian Century,* January 13, 2004, pp. 22-25; accessible online at http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2933. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In nineteenth century America, evangelicals in the Episcopal Church separated from the parent body to form the Reformed Episcopal Church. Robert Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), p.148: “Frustrated by their church’s inability to root out Oxford theology, a small number of evangelicals led by Bishop George David Cummins of Kentucky and priest Charles E. Cheney formed a separate Reformed Episcopal Church (1873).” The denomination remained a rather small splinter group, currently numbering some 141 congregations with an aggregate membership of 13,600. The Reformed Episcopal Church is expected to affiliate with the North American province of the emerging Anglican Church in North America. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On the “Anglican Catholic Church,” see online article at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican_Catholic_Church>; the denomination remains a relatively small group of 135 churches with a membership of some 10,000. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For information on this small Anglican denomination, see their website at <http://acahomeorg0.web701.discountasp.net/>. The denomination is said to have some 100 congregations and approximately 5,200 members. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See the denomination’s website and discussion of the Marian issues, “The Challenge to the Holy Catholic Church Anglican Rite,” at http://holycatholicanglican.org/resources/challenge.php. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For various accounts of these Evangelical/Anglo-Catholic tensions, see: Mark Chapman, *Anglicanism: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 57-93; George E. DeMille, *The Catholic Movement in the American Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Church Historical Society, 1950), esp. chpt.3, “The Impact of the Tracts”; chpt.4, “The Beginnings of Ritualism”; chpt.5, “The Fifties – the Storm Subsides”; chpt.6, “The Second Ritualistic War”; John Shelton Reed, *Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996; see esp. chpt.3, “Ritualism Rampant”; W.S.F. Pickering, *Anglo-Catholicism: a Study in Religious Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1989); Francis Penhale, *The Anglican Church Today: Catholics in Crisis* (London: Mowbray, 1986). On the marginalized place of the 39 Articles in the life of the Church of England today, see J.I. Packer and R.T. Beckwith, *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For an example of such a “Two Parish Vision” (Christ Church Episcopal of Hamilton-Wenham, MA), see the link at http://www.christchurchhw.org/postingdetail.php?sub=Master%20Calendar&id=659. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)