

A Pastor to Pastor Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe



BUILDING CHRIST'S CHURCH

T. M. MOORE

Readings and Meditations from Scripture and John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Building Christ's Church
Readings and Reflections in Scripture and Calvin's Institutes
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A Pastor to Pastor Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Introduction

Welcome to *Building Christ's Church: Readings and Reflections in Scripture and Calvin's Institutes*, in which we will overview Book IV of Calvin's great Reformation handbook, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in order to discover the Lord's plan for building His Church.

Pastor to Pastor studies combine the resources of Scripture and great Church leaders from the past in a format agreeable to personal or group study. We are happy to offer these resources at no charge to pastors and church leaders, to help you in better grounding the work of ministry in the Word of God and the great tradition and heritage of Christian Church leadership.

Pastor to Pastor studies can be used by church leaders as a supplement to their devotional reading or as a resource for leadership training. Daily "Next Steps" and weekly Questions for Reflection or Discussion can help in bringing new perspectives and developing new skills for the task of leading and building the local church.

Building Christ's Church: Readings and Reflections in Scripture and Calvin Institutes, explores the teaching of one of the great Protestant Reformers of the 16th century as he unpacks the teaching of the Scripture concerning the nature and purpose of the Church, and of the Lord's design in building His Body in unity and maturity.

Calvin was pressed into service as minister of one of Geneva's city churches in 1536. He would have preferred to move on to Basel and a life of study, but William Farel, Geneva's interim pastor, proved most persuasive in convincing Calvin to stay in Geneva and serve the flock of the Lord there.

His first stint among the recently reformed Genevans ended in his being cashiered and exiled to Strasbourg, where, under the tutelage of Martin Bucer, Calvin began to learn the art of ministry. Returning to Geneva in 1541, he took up the post from which he had been discharged and began what would be more than 20 years of fruitful ministry.

Book IV of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* is Calvin's attempt systematically to present what he learned from Scripture and practice concerning how to build the Church, following the Lord's blueprint and agenda. The 28 devotional readings that follow will provide many opportunities to reflect on our work as pastors among the flocks of the Lord.

The entries in this *Pastor to Pastor* study are arranged for a month of readings, one reading per day followed by a series of Questions for Reflection or Discussion at the end of the week.

We hope you will find this study helpful and encouraging as you continue the Lord's work in building His Church, His Body, His Bride.

T. M. Moore

Week 1, Day 1

For the Goal of Faith

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide..." John 15:16

Institutes of the Christian Religion¹

John Calvin (1509-1564)

"I shall start, then, with the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith."

The goal of faith is eternal life – knowing God and Jesus Christ, and increasing in the knowledge of Christ for a life of fruitfulness here and glory beyond (Jn. 17:3; 2 Pet. 3:18). The measure of the church is not the number of people in the pews, but the progress of faith and fruitfulness evidenced in the lives of all those entrusted to her care. Jesus calls His followers to bear fruit, and He brings them into the Church so that pastors and teachers might equip and encourage them for this work (Eph. 4:11-16; Heb. 10:24, 25).

Next Steps: In your church, how do the leaders keep track of the growth and ministries of the members? In your own life, do you have some means of keeping watch over your progress in the faith? Talk with another church leader about these questions.

Week 1, Day 2

One Body

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one, just as you, Father, are in in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." John 17:20, 21

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

"But all the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knitted together as are the limbs of a body. They are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God."

Oneness is a sure way of identifying a healthy church. When members confess the same faith, share their lives with one another, press on and encourage one another to increase in the knowledge of God and fruitfulness in Christ, then they are beginning to realize their purpose as the Church. This doesn't just happen, however. We have to work hard to achieve and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). Pastors and teachers must equip church members for unity (Eph. 4:11-13). Can our petty disagreements about this, that, and the other really be more important than working hard to maintain our unity in Christ?

Next Steps: Unity is "hard work." It requires equipping, encouragement, and loving oversight of the flock of God. What will you do today to promote greater unity among the members of your congregation?

¹All quotations are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, tr. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 2, Book IV, pp. 1012ff.

Week 1, Day 3

Shared Benefits

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 1 Corinthians 12:7

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“But a community is affirmed, such as Luke describes, in which the heart and soul of the multitude of believers are one; and such as Paul has in mind when he urges the Ephesians to be ‘one body and one Spirit, just as’ they ‘were called in one hope.’ If truly convinced that God is the common Father of all and Christ the common Head, being united in brother love, they cannot but share their benefits with one another.”

The Christian's witness to the world begins in his witness to his fellow church members. We are to love one another as Christ loved us, and to begin our good works in the Body of the Lord (Jn. 13:35; Gal. 6:9, 10). As we practice loving one another, using our gifts and opportunities to serve one another, encouraging one another in the faith, joining together to praise and thank the Lord, and sharing together in His Body and Blood, we cannot help but become transformed. The more we do this – the more we *actualize* the unity we have in Christ – the greater is the likelihood that this will flow out into our everyday lives as well. The church is the incubator of a witnessing way of life through the shared benefits and ministries of its members.

Next Steps: What opportunities does your church provide for members to identify and develop their gifts, and then for putting those gifts to use in serving their fellow church members? Today, how will you show the love of Christ to members of your congregation?

Week 1, Day 4

Through the Ministry of Men

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... Ephesians 4:11, 12

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“On the one hand, he approves our obedience by a very good test when we hear his ministers speaking just as if he himself spoke. On the other, he also 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.”

It is a high and holy calling to be entrusted with the ministry of the Word of God. It is through the Word, and the ministry of those called to it, that Christ intends to bring His saints to greater knowledge of Himself and more abundant fruitfulness. Thus the Lord builds up His Church in unity and maturity. It is a grave sin to take this calling lightly (Jms. 3:1), and an equally grave sin to regard lightly the words spoken to us by proven preachers and teachers, who minister the Word of God for our good.

Next Steps: Reflect on a recent sermon that particularly spoke to you. How did the Lord use this ministry to affect your thinking? Your desires and values? How might you encourage others to be more attentive to the teaching of God's Word?

Week 1, Day 5

Visible and Invisible

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Hebrews 12:1

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John Calvin (1509-1564)

“Then, indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. Often, however, the name ‘church’ designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ. By baptism we are initiated into faith in him; by partaking in the Lord’s Supper we attest our unity in true doctrine and love; in the Word of the Lord we have agreement, and for the preaching of the Word the ministry instituted by Christ is preserved.”

Does it ever trouble you that there is so little visible unity among the churches in your community? So little sharing in life, worship, ministry, and outreach together? Or that, in many churches today, there is but little regard for the saints who have gone before us, those who have made it possible, by their faithfulness, for the Gospel to come down to us? Would we so easily forget our beloved forebears in the flesh? Or neglect our brothers and sisters, living in the same town?

Next Steps: Do you think your church should be more involved in expressing unity with other Gospel-preaching, Christ-honoring churches in your community? What forms might such unity take? Talk with one or two other church leaders about these questions.

Week 1, Day 6

Who Belongs Here?

“Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.” John 7:24

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“Accordingly, the Lord by certain marks and tokens has pointed out to us what we should know about the church... And, since assurance of faith was not necessary, he substituted for it a certain charitable judgment where we recognize as members of the church those who, by confession of faith, by example of life, and partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.”

The church is not a society for everyone; we have to make some judgments about who does and does not belong. Not that we turn people away who are not “members” of our covenant community. However, we do expect that those who seek to unite with our local body, and thus to enjoy the shared benefits of its life together, will confess the same faith we confess, increase in knowledge and fruitfulness, and participate in the worship of Christ and the sacraments He has appointed to us. The first and last of these are easy. The middle one – increase in knowledge and fruitfulness – requires continuous oversight and instruction (Heb. 13:17). Here is where building Christ’s Church goes forth with greatest effects.

Next Steps: What “marks and tokens” does your church require of those who would be members? Would you say that all the members of your church are involved in improving their “example of life” as followers of Christ? Why or why not?

Week 1, Day 7

Word and Sacraments

"Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." John 13:16, 17

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

"From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. 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...It if 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 church. For it is certain that such things are not without fruit."

Note that emphasis on hearing and doing: we often hear that a mark of a true church is the preaching of the Word. But Calvin says, preaching together with hearing and honoring the Word are the true mark. And where we honor the Word we will participate in the sacraments faithfully and fruitfully. These are means God has provided to bring His Body to fruitfulness. How can we bear fruit, and how can we regard ourselves as members of Christ's Body, if we neglect these great gifts?

Next Steps: What do think Calvin means by "bearing" and "honoring" the Word? How can we know if we're actually doing that? Talk with another church leader about these questions.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. This first set of readings focuses on the Church as the one Body of Christ. Calvin believed it was important first to establish the "oneness" of the Church before he began to describe the unique characteristics and attributes of any particular church. Is this the way we generally approach the work of building Christ's Church? Can you see any advantages to beginning this way?
2. Meditate on Ephesians 4:3 and John 20:21. Why is our oneness in the Body of Christ so important, and why do we have to work so hard to maintain it?
3. Calvin understood the importance of the ministry of the Word. Book IV of the *Institutes* will begin and end at this place. Meditate on James 3:1, John 17:17, and Ephesians 4:11, 12. Why is the ministry of the Word so important? To what ends should it be directed?
4. Calvin insisted that one indicator of a faithful church is that the Word of God is preached, heard, and honored. How do leaders in your church determine the extent to which the Word is heard and honored among the members of the congregation? Is it important that some means be in place to do this (Heb. 13:17)? Why or why not?
5. What are your personal goals for this study? What do you hope to learn? How do you want to improve in your ability as one called to work at building-up the Body of Christ?

For prayer:

Week 2, Day 1

To Bring Forth Fruit

“A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” Matthew 7:18-20

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“We have laid down as distinguishing marks of the church the preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments. These can never exist without bringing forth fruit and prospering by God’s blessing. I do not say that wherever the Word is preached there will be immediate fruit; but wherever it is received and has a fixed abode, it shows its effectiveness.”

In a sense, the true marks of the Church, as Calvin – following Jesus – noted, are to be found in the fruitful lives of its members. It’s where the Word is *received* and has a *fixed abode* that the deep roots of Word and Spirit can bring forth the fruit of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit, which is the Kingdom of God. We must always strive to cultivate fruit in the lives of those we serve, not merely to throw the Word at them, come what may.

Next Steps: Suggest some ways that pastors and church leaders might be able to determine whether or not the Word they have sown has truly been received and achieved a fixed abode in the lives of those they serve. Talk with another church leader about your thoughts.

Week 2, Day 2

Resisting Disunity

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit... Ephesians 4:1-4

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“For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of the faith.”

The fragmented state of the Church today is a great sin. It betrays our claim to be the Body of Christ, which is one Body, and compromises our witness to the watching world (Jn. 17:21). The worst part of this situation is that church leaders do almost nothing to establish, express, and maintain the unity they have in Christ with other churches. Yes, this is hard work (Eph. 4:3, *spoudazontes*), but we must not let secondary doctrinal or ecclesiastical differences get in the way of our demonstrating the oneness we have in Christ.

Next Steps: How many churches in your community can you list that share with yours the views Calvin outlined in the quote above? Should your church be working to maintain some forms of unity with these churches? Why or why not?

Week 2, Day 3

Every Member a Builder

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry...
Ephesians 4:11, 12

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John Calvin (1509-1564)

“From [Paul’s statement in 1 Cor. 14:30 ff.] it is clear that every member of the church is charged with the responsibility of public edification according to the measure of his grace, provided he perform it decently and in order.”

The goal of pastoral ministry is to build the church and thus to realize Christ’s agenda (Matt. 16:18) within one’s own calling and context, and the people one serves. Building the church, however, depends on equipping the saints, and equipping them with vision, understanding, heart, will, and the skills and passion for ministry in their everyday lives. If the people aren’t ministering, the church won’t grow; but they won’t minister without being equipped, and this is the work of the pastor.

Next Steps: Would you say that every member of your church is continuously involved in being equipped for ministry and ministering to others? Should they be? Talk with another church leader about these questions.

Week 2, Day 4

Public and Private

“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Acts 20:20, 21

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“Therefore, in the communion of the saints, our sins are continually forgiven us by the ministry of the church itself when the presbyters or bishops to whom this office has been committed strengthen godly consciences by the gospel promises in the hope of pardon and forgiveness. This they do both publicly and privately as need requires.”

To pastors and elders (“bishops”) is entrusted the ministry of the Word of God. Whatever we do, whatever our calling requires of us, the Word of God must be central, with the desire of impressing the truths of the Gospel on the consciences of those we serve, until they will what God wills and thus freely do what God would have them do. All that a pastor does in his ministry week by week must line up behind this calling to preach and teach the Word, whether in public or in private, in season or out of it.

Next Steps: What can church leaders do to make sure that the Word of God has primacy of place in all their ministry activities? Talk with some other church leaders about this question.

Week 2, Day 5

Head of the Church

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. Ephesians 1:22, 23

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“[The Lord] alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone. Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in visible presence, we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work.”

Pastors and elders (church leaders) have an awesome responsibility. They are called to represent Christ and His will to His Body. He is the Head of His Body, and He exercises that Headship through the ministry of His Word, which has been entrusted to those in pastoral leadership. How vitally important it is that pastors and church leaders have a deep and growing relationship with Christ and His Word! Otherwise, how can they possibly represent Him and His will to His Body?

Next Steps: Suggest some ways the leaders of your church might encourage and hold one another accountable for growing in their relationships with Christ and His Word.

Week 2, Day 6

This Human Ministry

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Acts 20:28

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John Calvin (1509-1564)

“Paul shows...that this human ministry which God uses to govern the church is the chief sinew by which believers are held together in one body...through the ministers to whom he has entrusted this office and has conferred the grace to carry it out, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the church; and he shows himself present by manifesting the power of his Spirit in this institution, that it be not vain or idle.”

I wonder how many church members would point to their pastors and church leaders as the primary evidence of the Spirit's lively presence in their church. Calvin obviously had a very high view of the role of pastoral ministry, but it was a view he derived from the letters of Paul and the example of Jesus. The power of the Spirit – for fruit, gifts, and witness – will be manifested in church leaders first of all, before it becomes the common possession of the members of the congregation. No disciple is above his teacher, and no teacher is worthy of the name who does not show the evidence of the Spirit's power at work in his life.

Next Steps: What do you think: would the members of your church point to you and your leaders as the primary evidence of the Spirit's presence in your church? Why or why not? Ask a few of your church members to comment on these questions.

Week 2, Day 7

Extraordinary Offices

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists... Ephesians 4:11

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“...these three functions were not established in the church as permanent ones, but only for that time during which churches were to be erected where none existed before, or where they were to be carried over from Moses to Christ. 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...I call this office ‘extraordinary,’ because in duly constituted churches it has no place.”

Calvin’s point is that pastors and teachers are the offices God has given to build the local church. Apostles, prophets, and evangelists serve the larger Body of Christ or bring the Gospel to desolate or unevangelized areas, thus building the larger rather than the local church, while pastors and teachers are established to carry on the work of building up the local church. Thus by ordinary and extraordinary offices the Lord fulfills His agenda of building His Church.

Next Steps: Who would be some examples of men or women serving in these “extraordinary” offices in our day? How do or might they benefit your church?

For reflection or discussion

1. Local churches are built-up in unity and maturity as pastors and teachers equip the saints for the work of ministry. Meditate on Ephesians 4:11-16, then give a definition to each of the key terms you find in this passage.
2. All the ministry of a local church must be, in some form, a ministry of God’s Word. How would you suggest that pastors and church leaders work to make sure this is the case?
3. Christ is the Head of the Church, and we are members of His Body. What are the implications of this for each member, with respect to his or her contribution to the unity and maturity of the church?
4. While it’s “hard work” (Eph. 4:3) to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, it’s not impossible. What are some obstacles to overcome in maintaining unity within a local congregation? Among like-minded churches in the same community?
5. Meditate on Hebrews 10:24. Apply the teaching of this text to the work of church leaders toward one another.

For prayer:

Week 3, Day 1

The Office of Pastor

"But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Acts 6:4

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

"...in the office of the pastors also there are these two particular functions: to proclaim the gospel and to administer the sacraments. The manner of teaching not only consists in public discourses, but also has to do with private admonitions... That is, they have been set over the church not to have a sinecure but, by the doctrine of Christ to instruct the people to true godliness, to administer the sacred mysteries and to keep and exercise upright discipline."

Calvin cannot talk about the *office* of pastoral ministry without also pointing to the *effects* toward which the work of that office must strive. Pastors do not simply carry out functions or execute tasks. They are charged with *making disciples* and, where disciples are being made, godliness and uprightness should be much in evidence. The goal of pastoral ministry, in other words, is not ministry, but disciples.

Next Steps: Does this way of thinking about ministry affect the way you plan and assess your work? How should pastors and church leaders assess their effectiveness as shepherds in the flock of the Lord?

Week 3, Day 2

Elders

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you... Titus 1:5

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John Calvin (1509-1564)

"Governors [elders] were, I believe, elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the censure of morals and the exercise of discipline along with the bishops [pastors]... Each church, therefore, had from its beginning a senate, chosen from the godly, grave, and holy men, which had jurisdiction over the correcting of faults."

Paul's language to Titus might be seen as implying that churches without elders are churches not quite in order. Whether we call them elders or something else, somebody needs to take responsibility for the overall oversight of the spiritual wellbeing of all church members (Heb. 13:17). Elders are also called "overseers" (1 Tim. 3) because this is the very nature of their work. No elder can fulfill his calling merely by sitting on a board or managing a department or program. To elders is entrusted the care and nurture of souls.

Next Steps: Do the elders – or leaders – or your church take direct oversight of the souls of your church members? How do they do this?

Week 3, Day 3

Deacons

And let them be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 1 Timothy 3:10

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“The care of the poor was entrusted to the deacons... Unless my judgment deceive me, in the first clause [of Rom. 12:8] he designates the deacons who distribute the alms. But the second refers to those who had devoted themselves to the care of the sick... If we accept this (as it must be accepted), there will be two kinds of deacons: one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves... Scripture specifically designates as deacons those whom the church has appointed to distribute alms and take care of the poor, and serve as stewards of the common chest of the poor.”

By “poor” here Calvin means people with various sorts of material needs. One of the primary ministries of the church, as Calvin understood it, was to care for the poor members in its midst. In order to do this, alms were collected and managed and distributed by deacons, as needs arose or ongoing care was required. All the reformers were urgent about the duty of caring for the poor, and, typically, the pastors were counted among the first of the poor to be cared for by the church’s alms (see the reading of Calvin’s will in *The Record of the Company of Pastors in Geneva in the Time of Calvin*).

Next Steps: We don't have the same challenges of poverty in today's churches that Calvin had in his day. How do the deacons function in your church? How does your church care for the poor in the larger community?

Week 3, Day 4

A Company of Pastors

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons... Philippians 1:1

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“Each city, then, had a college of presbyters, who were pastors and teachers. For all exercised among the people the office of teaching, exhorting, and correcting, which Paul enjoins on bishops; and to leave successors after them, they labored hard to teach the younger men who enlisted in the sacred army.”

I've omitted most of Calvin's references to Scripture, but he is doing nothing more than giving us his understanding of what he read in the New Testament about the organization of the church. In Geneva there were several churches in Calvin's day, and several more in the outlying areas. The pastors met regularly as a “company” to discuss ministries, deal with discipline, assess one another's preaching, hear reports of pastoral visitation, and other matters. The unity of the church in Geneva had a profound affect on the expansion of the Reformation in places like Eastern Europe, Scotland, and the American colonies. In our day, we know almost nothing of such leadership by pastors in local communities.

Next Steps: Meditate on John 17:21. Are we compromising our witness by not seeking ways for our pastors and churches to join together in worship, outreach, and ministry, community by community?

Week 3, Day 5

Money and Priorities

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. Acts 4:32

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“At first they spent very little on the embellishment of sacred things; afterward, although the church became gradually richer, they still kept moderation in this respect. Whatever money was given to it still remained intact for the poor, should any great need arise.”

Hmmm. Next to staff, keeping up church property is typically the largest chunk of the budget of a local church. Churches need a place to worship and make disciples, but I think we've capitulated to the modernist spirit of the day when we feel we have to build expansive campuses with all kinds of multi-purposes facilities and all the latest technological gewgaws. Once we build these buildings, we tend to do everything in them, which keeps us from making disciples in the community, where people live – which we excuse by saying we're “seeker-friendly.” But aren't *we* supposed to be doing the seeking (Lk. 19:10)?

Next Steps: How much of the outreach and disciple-making of your church is conducted beyond the confines of your local facility?

Week 3, Day 6

Pastoral Training (1)

...and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 2 Timothy 2:2

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“But the institution itself [“the clergy” of a city] was particularly holy and profitable, for by it those who wished to consecrate themselves and their service to the church were brought up under the bishop's care. It also ensured that only well-prepared persons might minister to the church, for from early youth under sacred instruction and strict training they took on an exemplary life of gravity and holiness; and, separated from worldly cares, they became accustomed to spiritual cares and studies.”

The company of pastors in any city was responsible to train and prepare the next generation of pastoral leadership for the churches. The idea of sending a man off to a “seminary” to study with professional academics was precisely the kind of approach to pastoral training that Luther, Calvin, and others were trying to get away from. It makes sense that pastors should train pastors, over many years of teaching and disciple-making, and that such a role not be entrusted to academics only. Academics are important, and the Church needs them. But pastors-to-be need pastors for their preparation.

Next Steps: What is your church's role in helping to prepare the next generation of pastoral leaders for your community or for the larger Church? What might your church begin to do in this regard?

Week 3, Day 7

Pastoral Training (2)

For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. Titus 1:7

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“First, then, they were entrusted with the opening and closing of the church...Afterward they were called ‘acolytes,’ to assist the bishop in household tasks and continually to accompany him first for honor’s sake, then that no suspicion might arise. Moreover, that they might gradually become known to the people and acquire commendation for themselves, and at the same time learn to be seen by all and to speak before all; that, when made presbyters, they might not be covered with shame when they came forward to teach – they were given opportunity to read from the pulpit. In this way, to prove their diligence in individual exercises, they were promoted by degrees...”

Becoming a pastor in Calvin’s Geneva was a lengthy process of study, spiritual development, acquiring ministry skills, and gaining the confidence of the people. Such “on-the-job” training has much to commend the development of pastors for our day, although a typical seminary setting makes such training rather difficult. Internships provide some help, but they are typically short and poorly structured. Poor training for ministers creates poor pastoral leaders, and poor pastoral leaders lead shallow and marginalized churches.

Next Steps: Suppose your church might want to begin encouraging some young men to seek the ministry as a calling. What might your church do to begin their training now, even if, at some point, they have to go off to seminary?

For reflection or discussion

1. Calvin believed the New Testament provided definite outlines of structure for the growth of a local church. Summarize his views on how a church should be organized:
2. “Elders” are also called “overseers” in the New Testament. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 16:15 and Hebrews 13:17. What is involved in “overseeing” the souls of God’s people?
3. Read John 10, making note of everything Jesus says He does as the Good Shepherd (you should find at least six different ideas). How would you apply these disciplines to the work of pastors and elders in a local church today?
4. Deacons watch over the property of the congregation and the material needs of the poor. How does your church define “poor”?
5. Does your church have a vision for leadership development, including the development of the next generation of pastors and elders? How might your church improve their present practice in this regard?

For prayer:

Week 4, Day 1

No Other Word

I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.” 1 Corinthians 4:6

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“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 the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word.”

Evangelicals have always insisted on the primacy of the Word of God as source and touchstone for all teaching in the Church. But it's one thing to say this, and quite another to practice it consistently. Many churches today feature preachers who insist they are teaching the one, true Word, when, in fact, they are straying far from the path men such as Calvin would recognize.

Next Steps: How would you summarize your approach to making sure that, in all your ministry, you do not go beyond what is written in God's Word?

Week 4, Day 2

Furnished with Sure Commands?

As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace; whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God... 1 Peter 4:10, 11

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“Accordingly, Peter, who was well instructed by the master as to how much he should do, reserves nothing else for himself or others except to impart doctrine as it has been handed down by God...he says, ‘speak only the words of God’; that is, not hesitatingly and tremblingly as evil consciences are accustomed to speak, but with the high confidence which befits a servant of God furnished with his sure commands.”

Pastors must be students of God's Word, continually reviewing and digging deeper into the Scriptures in order to discern what is right and true and essential for the equipping of the saints. The pastor's study of the Word must be, first, for his own edification and enrichment. From there, he must consider the application of Scripture to the needs of his congregation and the temper of the times. The more we are furnished with the sure Word of God, the more we will grow to be like Jesus, and be equipped to help others in this same calling.

Next Steps: Are there any areas in which you would like to improve your approach to the reading and study of God's Word? Do you have a prayer partner or accountability partner with whom you share your studies?

Week 4, Day 3

All Things by God's Word

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16, 17

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“Here, then, is the sovereign power with which the pastors of the church, by whatever name they are called, ought to be endowed. That is that they may dare boldly to do all things by God's Word; may compel all worldly power, glory, wisdom, and exaltation to yield to and obey his majesty; supported by his power, may command all from the highest even to the last; may build up Christ's household and cast down Satan's; may feed the sheep and drive away the wolves; may instruct and exhort the teachable; may accuse, rebuke, and subdue the rebellious and stubborn; may bind and loose; finally, if need be, may launch thunderbolts and lightnings; but do all things in God's Word.”

In churches today we engage in a wide range of programs, activities, boards, committees, and so forth. Are we careful to make sure that each of these has the sanction of God's Word, and that all the work of each of these is done in a manner consistent with and according to the plain teaching of Scripture? We must not *substitute* the world's ways of getting things done for what the Scriptures teach; rather, to the extent that we borrow on worldly wisdom – and there is a place for this (Ex. 18) – it must be only in such a way as to *aid* in fulfilling what the Scriptures require, and should always be *subordinate* to any clear teaching of God's Word concerning how we must build His Church.

Next Steps: How confident are you that all the work of your church is being done according to the teaching of God's Word? Talk with some other church leaders about this question.

Week 4, Day 4

Gathered in His Name

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Matthew 18:20

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

“Christ promises nothing except to those who are gathered in his name. Let us therefore define what that means. I deny that they are gathered in his name who, casting aside God's commandment that forbids anything to be added to or taken away from his Word, ordain anything according to their own decision; who, not content with the oracles of Scripture, that is, the sole rule of perfect wisdom, concoct some novelty out of their own heads.”

Calvin's advice applies to all kinds of gatherings – meetings, worship, Bible study groups, church courts, even family gatherings for a meal. We can only expect to know the presence of Christ in our gatherings when we set them up according to His agenda, and not our own. Jesus will not come to our gatherings in order to discover how we might like Him to do our business for us. He comes to our gatherings when we, submissive to His Word and one another, enter together for the sake of the Kingdom, and for the building-up of His Body.

Next Steps: How can we know when our various gatherings are beginning to swerve from what God has clearly revealed to us in His Word?

Week 4, Day 5

Reviewing Doctrines and Definitions

"Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree..." Acts 15:14, 15

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

"...whenever a decree of any council is brought forward, I should like men first of all diligently to ponder at what time it was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present; then to examine by the standard of Scripture what it dealt with – and to do this in such a way that the definition of the council may have its weight and be like a provisional judgment, yet not hinder the examination which I have mentioned."

Calvin believed everything should be evaluated by the Word of God, even the decisions made by church bodies or ministry bodies within churches. Unless our doctrines, definitions, decisions, and determinations can be shown to be in line with Scripture, and for the furthering of Christ's Kingdom, we have no grounds to suppose that the Lord's blessing will abide on what we intend. This comes down to our daily actions and all the work of ministry we do as well. In order to have a good conscience before the Lord, we must review and assess all we do, to determine whether we have departed from the will of God in any way (Ps. 139:23, 24).

Next Steps: Do you have a system for reviewing the use of your time and your activities in ministry that fulfills this requirement? What about your church?

Week 4, Day 6

Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Matthew 18:17

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

"...this is the aim of ecclesiastical jurisdiction: that offenses be resisted, and any scandal that has arisen be wiped out. In its use two things ought to be taken into account: that this spiritual power be completely separated from the right of the sword; secondly, that it be administered not by the decision of one man but by a lawful assembly. Both of these were observed when the church was purer."

Churches today seem reluctant to wield the power and authority granted to them by the Lord Himself. We prefer to turn a blind eye to sin – whether of omission or commission – than to confront a brother. Church "trials" are rare these days; we have substituted a false idea of "tolerance" and "forbearance" as the way to love the sinners in our midst. And, while we should always practice these, our practice must not be such that sin is ignored, allowed, or, worse, endorsed. Church discipline is a loving tool for improving the lives of believers and congregations alike. We must learn to use it as Christ intends.

Next Steps: Does your church practice church discipline? Do your members understand the Biblical teaching about the nature and practice of church discipline?

Week 4, Day 7

Much More Necessary

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." Hebrews 12:5, 6

Institutes of the Christian Religion

John Calvin (1509-1564)

"But because some persons, in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name, let them understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible. Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place."

Imagine an athletic team without discipline. Or a school. Or even a family. Discipline is not, in the first instance, punishment. Discipline is behavior undertaken to correct false practices, or to improve lagging ones. Some disciplines we are called to embrace in an active manner, according to our needs: reading Scripture, prayer, worship, and so forth. But other disciplines the Lord imposes as we require, in order to arrest us on a wayward path and bring us back to the way of righteousness. A church without both kinds of discipline cannot grow to maturity in the Lord.

Next Steps: How would you describe the state of such discipline in your church today? What might you do to improve the use of discipline in your church?

For reflection or discussion

1. Suggest some ways to evaluate the ministries of a local church in order to make sure they are bearing fruit for the Lord:
2. What is church discipline? Why does it matter? What can you expect in a church that refuses or fails to practice church discipline?
3. Jesus said, "I will build My Church" (Matt. 16:18). Why does the local church matter so much? What is the relationship between the local church and the Kingdom of God?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned from these readings and meditations?
5. How are you planning to implement that lesson in your own work of ministry?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.