

Reformation: John Calvin's *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. As is well-known, this work is divided into four main parts. These are, roughly speaking, first, God the Father and our creation; second, God the Son and our redemption; third, God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification; and, fourth, the church. This last part of Calvin's *Institutes* is way longer than any of the other three. In fact, it forms more than one third of the book. The title of the fourth part of the *Institutes* gives us Calvin's perspective on the significance of the truth of the church: "The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein."

If you are a son or daughter of the Reformation and treasure this great work of God, then you cannot be lukewarm towards the truth of Christ's church. The glory of the Reformation was its reformation of the Lord's visible churches. Likewise, the calling of reformation in our day is especially that of reforming the churches, by God's grace.

A third important perspective on the importance of ecclesiology is provided by the Reformed confessions. Here is a thematic analysis of the *Belgic Confession's* articles on ecclesiology: the nature of the church (27); joining the church (28); the marks of the church (29); the government and offices of the church (30-31); the order and discipline of the church (32); the sacraments of the church (33), namely, baptism (34) and the Lord's supper (35); and church and state (36).

Notice, first, that the *Belgic Confession* is thorough, dealing with the church's nature, membership, marks, government, offices, order, discipline and sacraments, as well as its relationship to civil government. Flowing from the first point, we observe, second, that the *Belgic Confession's* exposition of the doctrine of the church is lengthy. Its treatment of ecclesiology receives 10 articles (27-36), whereas this confession gives 5 articles to soteriology or the doctrine of salvation (22-26). Since the *Belgic Confession* consists of 37 articles, its treatment of ecclesiology is over a quarter of its articles. In fact, over 27% of the articles of the *Belgic Confession* (1561) are on the doctrine of the church.

What place does Christ's church have in our thinking? Tragically, and to their own serious loss, there are those of whom it could be said that the church has only a small place in their hearts and minds and lives. If this had been Jesus Christ's attitude to the church, He would never have laid down His life for her on the cross in order to cleanse her and glorify her, and to present her to Himself in marriage (Eph. 5:25-27)!

Augustine (354-430) expressed well the Christian's love for the truth of the church and the true church: "The city of God we speak of is the same to which testimony is borne by that Scripture ... 'Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God.' And in another psalm we read, 'Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness, increasing the joy of the whole earth' ... And in another, 'There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of our God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved.' From these and similar testimonies ... we have learned that there is a city of God, and its Founder has inspired us with a love which makes us covet its citizenship" (*The City of God*, 11:1). Let this live in our hearts!

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Three Good Reasons to Honour Christ's Church

Sadly, in most of conservative Christianity, there is a grievous disinterest in, and an abysmally low view of, the truth of God's church. Most know little and care less about ecclesiology, the glorious doctrine of the body of Christ. Let me give you three reasons why you and all professing Christians should care about the church.

First, all disrespect and indifference towards the church stands in stark contrast to God's written revelation. The first 17 books of the Bible, Genesis to Esther, record the history of the church from the salvation of Adam and Eve to the return of God's people from the Babylonian captivity. The last 17 books of the Old Testament, from Isaiah to Malachi, summarize the prophets' preaching to the church.

In the 4 gospel accounts, Matthew 16:18-19 declares that the purpose of Christ's incarnation and redemption is to "build [His] church," to which He gives "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Acts records the work of Christ by His Holy Spirit in gathering His holy, catholic or universal church. To whom are the 21 New Testament epistles addressed? Most of them were written in the first instance to churches, congregations in Rome, Galatia, etc. The rest of these letters were addressed to church office-bearers or members, such as Philemon, Gaius (III John), Timothy and Titus. Even the last canonical book, Revelation, was written, first of all, to 7 existing church institutes (Rev. 1:4, 11).

Turning to the specific focus of individual biblical books, we note that the Psalms are the songs of the church. Zechariah emphasizes God's love and salvation of the church. I Corinthians deals with a host of church problems. Ephesians extols the church as the body of Christ, treating its election (ch. 1), catholicity (ch. 2-3), unity (ch. 4) and holiness (ch. 4-6). The three pastoral epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus) set forth the institutional structure and work of the church. Revelation 2-3 consists of Christ's commendations, critiques, admonitions and promises to organized churches.

Do you read the books of the Bible? Have you understood the prominence of God's church upon its pages? As you search the Scriptures in the future, look out for the Bible's massive theme of ecclesiology. Let us think God's thoughts after Him and highly esteem the body of His Son!

Second, what about the great sixteenth-century Reformation? Have you ever thought of this question: Of what was it the reformation? It was a reformation, of course, of many things, including preaching, worship, doctrine, etc. But centrally, it was the Reformation *of the church!* As such, it was the reformation of church preaching, church worship, church doctrine, etc.

Another way of emphasizing this is to consider the greatest theological book of the
(continued on p. 4)

— The Song of Solomon: Canonical and Christocentric —

A reader asks, “I am interested in some views on the Song of Solomon. When attending a lecture, the pastor never tired of reminding us from Ephesians 5:22-33 that it was a picture of the love God has for His church, and marriage is a reflection of that love. My question is, What evidence internally from the book itself is there to prove the above view, which I believe is the traditional interpretation?”

A classmate of mine, while we were studying in college, later took the position that the Song of Solomon did not have anything to do with Ephesians 5:22-33. It was not a song depicting the love that is a reality in the love between Christ and His church, nor did it have anything to do with the love between a man and his wife.

When I asked him what he made of the book, he answered, “It is an erotic love song”—with emphasis, I presume, on the word erotic. I do not remember what his answer was when I asked him whether he thought it belonged in the canon of Scripture but, from his later writings, I suspect that he did want to preserve its canonicity—although the purpose of the book in the canon is then difficult to determine.

It is well to remind ourselves what criteria were used by the church to determine which books properly belong in Scripture and which books are apocryphal.

The explanation can be found in *Belgic Confession* 5, entitled “From Whence the Holy Scriptures Derive Their Dignity and Authority.” The article reads, “We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing, without any doubt, all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves of them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves. For the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are fulfilling.”

In a sense, the church has always held that the 66 books we believe are canonical are indeed that. Already in the days of Josiah, when many of the people did not even know there was a Bible, a copy of the book of the law was found in the temple and immediately recognized as God’s Word (II Kings 22:8-23:2).

It is generally accepted that an early Jewish council in Jamnia (c. 90 AD) fixed the Old Testament canon, which decision accords with our Lord who referred to “the law and the prophets.” Almost from the beginning of the post-apostolic era, the church recognized the same books of the New Testament as canonical. A dispute may have swirled around a few books but the church as a whole considered the books in our Bibles, including the Song of Songs, as being truly canonical. The Council of Carthage in 397 AD, for example, ranked the Song of Solomon in the canon.

Belgic Confession 5 speaks of the external evidence and the internal evidence of the canonicity of the 66 books listed in *Belgic Confession* 4. Interestingly, both the external and internal evidence are the work of the Holy Spirit. He inspired the Scriptures and He works in the hearts of the elect to recognize this. To believe what the Spirit inspired

is to believe the whole of Scripture to be from God. The internal testimony of the Spirit in our hearts is by means of the external testimony of the Scriptures themselves.

Here is a human example of this. If my copy of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* has on its title page the name John Calvin as the author and the entire book is in keeping with all we know of John Calvin, it is pretty hard to prove to me that he did not write that book. The external evidence is his name on the title page and the internal evidence is that the contents perfectly reflect everything we know of the French Reformer.

I make a point of this because the Bible is an organic unity written by one Author and not just a conglomeration of books written by different authors—as is widely believed today by those who deny Scripture’s verbal inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

I have emphasized that the Song of Solomon has always been part of the canon because what follows from this conviction is the proof for the fact that the Song of Solomon describes in poetry the love between Christ and His church.

Scripture is an organic unity containing only one theme and written by one Author. We may well ask what that theme is. The answer is: The mighty work of God in Jesus Christ through whom God saves an elect church to live in covenant fellowship with Him to His everlasting praise and glory.

When I taught in the seminary, I often used the figure of the Bible being a portrait of Jesus Christ, who is the revelation of God. Every book of Scripture is a part of that portrait. My own teacher while I was a student in seminary told us that, before we began to write out our sermons, we should put a cross on the upper right hand corner of page 1 to remind ourselves that we must preach Christ crucified or we are not preaching the Word of God. Christ must not be tacked on to the sermon once in a while; He must not be “presupposed,” that is, simply assumed to be behind what is said. We must follow the example of Paul, who wrote, “we preach Christ crucified” (I Cor. 1:23). That is all we ever preach. Scripture is the full story of all God’s mighty works in Jesus Christ. So it is with the narratives; so it is with the exhortations; so it is with the poetry; so it is even with Genesis 1-11. Let no one think that he will never have enough to preach on, if he takes the position that every word speaks of Christ crucified. God’s works are infinite in their number and marvellous in their richness.

Put all that together and one has proof, irrefutable proof, of the fact that the Song of Solomon is a song that celebrates the union of Christ and His beloved church. Even the church in the old dispensation recognized that in this remarkable Song of Songs. The portrait of Christ in the Holy Scriptures would be impoverished if the Song of Solomon were not part of the canon.

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