

## THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

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### INTRODUCTION

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth. ...  
Let all the earth fear the Lord;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.  
**For he spoke, and it came to be;**  
he commanded, and it stood firm.*

- Psalm 33:6-9 sel.

There are an abundance of spiritual voices in the world today. Societies are increasingly plural in speech about God. However the abundance of possibility being voiced has yet to satisfy an evident spiritual hunger among the peoples. The church “is in, with, against, and for”<sup>1</sup> this plural world in multiple ways all at once. The church catalyzes the world in varied forms according to the divergence of settings in which it is found. Yet regardless of its circumstance, the church exists in response to the call of God.

*He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.  
When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them,  
and the sheep follow him because  
**they know his voice.**  
They will not follow a stranger.*

- John 10:3-5

This is the starting point of my understanding the Church. It is God’s creation. It is not simply another spiritual manifestation in the world. The Church belongs to Jesus Christ and is God’s creation by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls to us, seeks us out, and satisfies our spiritual hunger in pastures green with spiritual nourishment.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas F. Ottati, *Reforming Protestantism: Christian Commitment in Today’s World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 93-116.

## BORN OF THE SPIRIT

*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God  
without being born of water and Spirit.”*

*- John 3:5*

The origin of an understanding of the Church is found in the power of the Holy Spirit. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is both the origin and sustaining force of the church. Consequently a proper understanding of the Church requires a grounded understanding of sanctification.

Sanctification was a central emphasis of Calvin’s ministry in Geneva and has properly belonged at the heart of Reformed witness ever since.<sup>2</sup> Sanctification is the “newness of life” attained through faith that is conferred by Christ.<sup>3</sup> Christ “unites himself to us by the Spirit alone”<sup>4</sup> and “faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> This work of the Holy Spirit is nourished and guided through the Church in God’s children “until they mature and at the last reach the goal of faith.”<sup>6</sup>

The power of God manifest in the Holy Spirit is what shapes the Church. Vague and generalized talk about the movement of the spirit does not identify the Church. Christians are not called by inchoate spiritual winds. “Take away *the Word* and no faith will then remain.”<sup>7</sup> The Church is born of the “ruach” - the “wind” of God’s breath. That breath, “the Word”, is established. It calls for response and blows in the world with the force of God as Holy Spirit.

The sanctifying work of God offers a framework for understanding the calling of the Church. God calls the Church into being and sustains the Church in mission. The call of God

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 372ff.; referenced in John H. Leith, *Basic Christian doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 187, n. 4.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1.1, 537-538.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.3.1, 592.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.4, 541.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.1.1, 1012.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.2.6, 549.

gathers us and the power of God sends us. The mission of the Church and the nature of the Church are united in its calling from God.

The Reformed heritage of the Christian faith has emphasized the sanctifying work of God always reforming our life together. As Harold Nebelsick wrote, "We are the recipients of the activity of the Holy Spirit which reforms the church in accordance with the Word of God."<sup>8</sup> This transforming work of reformation is recognized: in clear proclamation of the Word; and as the sacraments are shared in accord with the grace of God.<sup>9</sup>

We understand that a calling from God does not exist in solitude. The Holy Spirit came upon the *gathered* disciples on the day of Pentecost. Today the community lends its confirmation to every genuine call because each true call sustains an echo in faithful response that is audible for those whose ears are trained to hear<sup>10</sup> the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

The Holy Spirit calls us toward a common destiny.<sup>12</sup> The Church nourishes our lives by training that is powered by the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> Sanctification is described by Calvin as the life changing work of repentance. This work of the Holy Spirit is regeneration by faith. Such transformation takes place in the Church as a kind of lifelong school of discipleship.<sup>14</sup> The power of the Holy Spirit strengthens and sends the Church to teach and preach the Gospel in every place. This is not the work of a day, but of a lifetime.<sup>15</sup> It is the work of the Holy Spirit that calls, transforms, and sends the Church in proclamation.

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<sup>8</sup> Harold Nebelsick, "Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* (Spring 1984); quoted in Anna Case-Winters, "Our Misused Motto," *Presbyterians Today*, May 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, 4.1.9, 1023.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.2.6, 548-49.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.4, 541.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.9.3, 714-15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.1.6, 1020-21; Gal. 3:2

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.1.4, 1016.

<sup>15</sup> *Calvin's New Testament Commentary Series*. ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. John W. Frasier and J.G.W. McDonald, vol. 6, *Acts of the Apostles 1-13* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 32.

## THE GREAT BANQUET

*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave  
a wedding banquet for his son.*

*- Matthew 22:2*

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke share a parable of Jesus about a great banquet that was prepared.<sup>16</sup> Invitations had been sent out to guests so that they were able to prepare for the occasion. On the day of the banquet, servants were sent out to inform the guests that all was ready. Yet the invited guests did not arrive in timely fashion. So the servants were sent out again. Only this time the servants were sent to gather people from the roads and hedgerows so the extravagance of the banquet could be shared.

Since the gathered Church is a foretaste or exhibition of the kingdom of heaven, allow me to use the contours of this parable to reflect upon the calling of the Church.

### Called to Celebrate

In our wired and highly interconnected world, there are barely a few places in the globe that have yet to hear about the Christian faith in some way, shape, or form. Even if the faith is understood as but a caricature laced with misunderstandings or apprehensions, most of the world has heard of Jesus and people who call themselves Christian. Just as most of the world has spent some time discussing heaven and what may await them after death. So also, most of the world knows that Christians live with an expectation of heavenly reward.

Every time we gather for the Lord's Supper in our congregation, we anticipate the great heavenly banquet. Our lives are oriented toward this heavenly reward of communion with God and with the beloved whom God has called. The world knows that we anticipate this banquet - just as the villagers in Jesus' parable must all have been aware that a banquet had been planned.

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<sup>16</sup> Matt. 22:1-10; Luke 14:15-24.

The rub of the parable begins when servants are sent out to announce the banquet was ready. Yet despite the fact that everyone knew the banquet had been planned no one deemed it worthy of their time to come. Could this tell us something about the Church and the world?

I realize that the parable at this point is addressing a different context and that tensions between Gentile and Jewish Christians can be seen in its exposition. But I would like to consider it in light of our own situation.

Could it be that the world knows of an invitation but, after watching the Church through the centuries, considers our banquet to be a tasteless meal? Or could it be that the Church has grown so familiar with its routine that it has forgotten to celebrate the life we have been given? I believe we are called to celebrate.

In my household the call goes out most every evening for dinner. Everyone hears the call and understands that there is an expectation involved in the call. My wife and I respond to each other's call because we know that all is ready and we love the person who calls us. The call and the table define our lives in relationship to each other. The call sets our lives in motion to be gathered and nourished.

Like the call to dinner at home, God's call brings us to the table and sets our lives in motion. Like at home, some days are more ordinary than others. Yet the call to every Christian is a call to celebrate. We are called to celebrate a meal that tastes like heaven. I believe the Holy Spirit gives us power to celebrate the life we share as Church.

### Called to Change

Those who respond to the call of God come as they are, drawn by the power of grace. Just as billions of people around the world come to the Lord's Table for communion every week, so the banquet hall in Jesus' parable was filled with guests. The celebration began even without those who defined their lives by their excuses.

Yet even as the hall is filled in Jesus' parable, a jarring note is sounded. Luke suggests that none who were invited would taste the meal, then Jesus in Luke goes on to tell us we cannot be his disciple if we do not take up the cross. Matthew tells the story with even more jarring

impact. The king noticed that one of the guests was not wearing a wedding robe. When the man was speechless without excuse, he was bound and thrown into the outer darkness.

In our family, when we gather at table, there is an expectation of manners. This extends not only to the particulars of Emily Post, but also to the quality of the conversation we share. We are expected to be honest about our daily lives. We also are expected to encourage one another in our challenges as well as our successes. These and other expectations are rarely explicit except when they are noticeably neglected. The manners of spirit that we expect at table are as integral to our meals as our clothes are to our being. They are noticed in their absence.

How could the King expect a guest pulled from the hedgerows to have found a wedding robe in short order to wear? Likewise, how can the grace of God call us as we are and yet expect such dramatic change in our lives?

We are expected to change because the Holy Spirit has called us to “put on Christ.” Our baptismal gown is a wedding robe that engrafts us in Holy Communion with Christ. We are changed when we come to the table – not because of our accomplishments – but because the power of the Holy Spirit has made us part of the Body of Christ. The sanctifying power of God is a call to change.

#### Called to Announce

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” goes the familiar expression. Yet the poor messengers of Matthew’s parable seem to gain nothing but trouble. They are ignored, scoffed at, shamed, and even killed. In Luke, the messengers are met with nothing but excuses. Yet still the master sends them out to announce, invite, and even compel by word and deed. Why does the master keep sending them out from the banquet hall?

From the window of my dining room, I look out upon the birds of the air – as I try to gain the wisdom Jesus commends me to notice. Yet for all the beauty and the joy I gain by watching these birds, I have noticed a primary avian fixation – they are all about the food. The birds out my window are in an insatiable quest to eat every last seed from our bird feeders. The feast is prepared and they know it right well. Even ducks, with no pond in sight, come waddling up to

the seeds the smaller birds carelessly toss overboard to the ground. At least the birds can appreciate a banquet – for them, it’s all about the food!

But in Jesus’ parable it is not all about the food. In many ways the banquet seems to be all about the invitation. Were we to arrive at this banquet, I believe the most important element would not be the dishes or decorations. It would be the place card prepared with our name upon it. The invitation – a place at the king’s table – that is what the banquet is all about. There is a place prepared for us all – family, friends, poor, blind, and crippled.

Since the banquet is all about the invitation, the servants are sent time and again to announce that all is prepared. Just as the disciples had gathered in one place for prayer, the wind of Pentecost sent them with power into the streets for proclamation. In the gospel of Mark, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and he was immediately sent into the wilderness and his first spoken words were these, “the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”<sup>17</sup> The kingdom of God is near – the banquet is ready. Repent and believe the good news – Calvin says this is what the Christian endeavor is all about.<sup>18</sup> The same Holy Spirit sends us.

Presbyterians acknowledge two sacraments because they are the actions Jesus commanded us to do. We come to the banquet table as Jesus commanded us in remembrance of him. We then are sent to announce a newness of life and reconciling grace as we baptize in the name of the Triune God. A calling from God sets our lives in rhythmic motion to and from the table where we are nourished and changed by the grace of God.

## DESTINED FOR GLORY

“We begin in the present life, through various benefits, to taste the sweetness of the divine generosity in order to whet our hope and desire to seek after the full revelation of” the glory of the Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

– John Calvin, Meditation on the Future Life

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<sup>17</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, 3.3.1, 592.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 3.9.3, 715.

Every meal at our table begins with prayer. While we have taught our children how to “pray in all circumstances,” the first posture of prayer has been to bow our heads. Then, as each prayer finishes with an “Amen” our heads are lifted.

The head of a believer is lifted. The Holy Spirit elevates our vision from the ordinary to the extraordinary. The “epiclesis” – the bidding of the Holy Spirit – in our prayers of thanksgiving welcomes this vision into our sacraments.

When believers have “once lifted their heads above everything earthly,” with mind intent upon heaven,

“before their eyes will be that day when the Lord will receive his faithful people into the peace of his Kingdom, ‘will wipe away every tear from their eyes’, will clothe them with ‘a robe of glory ... and rejoicing’, will feed them with the unspeakable sweetness of his delights, will elevate them to his sublime fellowship - in sum, will deign to make them sharers in his happiness.”<sup>20</sup>

We exhibit the kingdom of heaven in the Church because we expect the kingdom of heaven at the last.

Jesus Christ “unites himself to us by the Spirit alone.”<sup>21</sup> “Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup> The Church “belongs to the realm of faith”<sup>23</sup> and nourishes that faith with its being.<sup>24</sup> “The proper object of faith is God’s goodness”<sup>25</sup> and we begin to taste the sweetness of that goodness in the life of the Church.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.9.6, 718.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3.1.3, 541.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.1.4, 541.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4.1.3, 1015.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4.1.1, 1012.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 3.3.19, 614.

At least, that is God’s intention. Yet all too often, our life together in the Church breeds contention and discord. We do not eat together. We do not invite others to our tables. We do not change our behavior toward one another. Have we neglected our calling?

When I learn I will have to sit beside someone at dinner, I become more thoughtful about my behavior. How might our behavior as Church change if we would not only acknowledge our common baptism but also embrace our common destiny at the heavenly banquet?

Presbyterians are regularly dragged into conversation about predestination. Then, our speech often devolves into discussions of who is in and who is out. Yet would it not be more profitable to consider our common destiny? If the “pre” of every Christian is being born of water and the Spirit, is not the “destination” of our lives the great banquet feast where we are to glorify and enjoy God forever?

“Yet, to embrace the unity of the church in this way, we need not see the church with the eyes or touch it with the hands. ... For here we are not bidden to distinguish between reprobate and elect – that is for God alone, not for us, to do – but to establish with certainty in our hearts that all those who, by the kindness of God the Father, through the working of the Holy Spirit, have entered into fellowship with Christ, are set apart as God’s property and personal possession; and that when we are of their number *we share that great grace.*”<sup>26</sup>

Since, “even the best and most excellent plan of the present life is only a progression, we shall arrive at that goal” (of being spotless and blameless before God) “only when, having put off this sinful flesh, we cleave wholly to the Lord.”<sup>27</sup> This is our destination by the power of the Holy Spirit – to be sharers in the happiness of God. Shall we not embrace the union we share in Christ and encourage our daily progressions with heads that are lifted and vision that is fixed on our glorious shared destiny?

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.1.3, 1015-16.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.17.15, 820.

## CONCLUSION

“Let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses ... What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.”<sup>28</sup>

The calling of the Church is born of the Spirit and establishes a glorious destiny. Our senses are often dulled to the vitality of faithful life in the Holy Spirit. Yet still the call of the God is gathering us, renewing us, and sending us to flavor the world with hope. We dare not become salt that has lost its taste.

“The faithful are never reconciled to God without the gift of sanctification – to this end we are justified – that afterwards we might worship God in holiness of life.”<sup>29</sup>

The banquet is ready. Let us come, be refreshed, and announce good news to the world.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.17.10, 1370.

<sup>29</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. 7, *Antidote to the Acts of the Synod of Trent*, 448.; noted in John H. Leith, *Basic Christian doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 188, n. 9.