

The Progress of the Kingdom: Calvin's Pastoral Care for Rulers

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Abstract

John Calvin was ever the pastor, not only to those close to him but also to those far away, not only to normal believers but also to those in high places. In the dedicatory letters to his writings, Calvin very often addresses kings, queens, and other rulers. He places their reigns on the continuum of the kingdom of Christ from its beginning until its consummation. On this continuum, Calvin encourages and exhorts rulers to work for the restoration of true doctrine and the eradication of all heresy. He does this in the context of each dedicatee's context and current affairs. These texts reveal a form of pastoral ministry seldom discussed.

Keywords

John Calvin, pastoral care, earthly rulers, kingdom, restoration, true doctrine, heresy, Queen Elizabeth II, Vladimir Putin

Introduction

For seventy years (1952–2022) she was the monarch of the United Kingdom, a constant figure among world leaders. Needless to say, after Queen Elizabeth II passed away recently, a lot has been written about many aspects of her reign and personal character. For Christians around the world the queen's faith

was one of her most outstanding qualities. Besides her formal role as “Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England,” which came with the monarchy, it was her personal faith that stood out. “Pray for me ... that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life”—thus she requested in her first Christmas message in 1952.¹ And in her last Christmas message in 2021 she spoke of “the life of Jesus, a man whose teachings have been handed down from generation to generation, and have been the bedrock of my faith.”² A seventy-year reign, guided by as many years of personal faith. But who took care of that faith—except, of course, for God himself? *Who pastored the queen?* A tentative attempt to answer this question can be made. On the one hand, there were royal chaplains. About one of these, Carl Trueman, in a eulogy on the queen, writes,

A friend who once had the privilege of being a royal chaplain and spending a weekend at Balmoral Castle confirmed that the conversations he had with the queen revealed her to be a thoughtful, devout Christian. As a humble Christian she took her earthly vocation seriously, placing the needs of the office and of the people she ruled before her own.³

On the other hand, it is fairly well known that the queen attached particular value to the company and counsel of the American evangelist Billy Graham. From the mid-1950s, when Graham was first invited to preach at the chapel at Windsor Castle, he and the queen met on at least a dozen occasions. Graham often ended these meetings in prayer; he also pledged to remember the queen and her family daily in his prayers.⁴ What we have in these ministries, both by the chaplains and the evangelist, is pastoral care to the highest authorities in the earthly realm.

On January 15, 1559, John Calvin, the Genevan Reformer, writes to Queen Elizabeth—not the second, but the first (r. 1558–1603).⁵ It was the day of

¹ Author unknown, “Queen Elizabeth’s Faith,” *Christianity*, January 9, 2023, <https://christianity.org.uk/article/queen-elizabeths-faith>.

² Queen Elizabeth II, “The Queen’s 2021 Christmas Speech,” *The Royal Family Channel*, January 9, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3ACe_3eKw&ab_channel=TheRoyalFamilyChannel.

³ Carl Trueman, “The Quiet Faith of Queen Elizabeth II,” *First Things*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/09/the-quiet-faith-of-queen-elizabeth-ii>.

⁴ Billy Graham, *Just as I Am* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 689–90.

⁵ *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (hereafter, *CO* followed by the volume and page number[s]), 59 vols., ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Braunschweig, 1863–1900), 17:413–15.

her coronation. In this letter Calvin laments the short period of dispersion of the church and oppression of pure doctrine in England that occurred under the reign of Elizabeth's predecessor (Mary I, 1553–1558). He expresses the hope that under the reign of Elizabeth the doctrine of godliness will be restored, and he implores her in the name of Christ to promote religion. He reminds the queen that she too had to suffer under the previous reign and that God saved her, and therefore she is under obligation to devote herself to her Protector and Redeemer. Calvin calls on the queen to be a nursing mother to the church (based on Isa 49:23). Finally, he prays that God will guide her by the Spirit of wisdom, and that he will protect and enrich her with every kind of blessing.⁶

In this and many other such letters, Calvin gave pastoral care to the highest authorities in the earthly realm. Pastoral care to earthly rulers—not many pastors today think about, are afforded the opportunity to, or are confronted with the needs and requirements of such a form of pastoral ministry. This article will explore this form of pastoral ministry, particularly as found in Calvin's so-called dedicatory letters, which he attached to several of his writings. Before we get to these dedicatory letters, however, we will first consider some foundational issues.

1. The Framework for Calvin's Pastoral Ministry to Kings and Queens: The Kingdom of Christ

The pastor has a fourfold task, according to Calvin. He has to proclaim the word of God, visit the flock, administer the sacraments, and apply church discipline.⁷ Visiting the flock is the task that is of particular interest to this article. This manner of proclaiming the word was Calvin's answer to the Roman practice of confession: he put the confessional booth on wheels so that it could be driven to each address in the church. The confessional was not stowed away in the closet but was placed in the living room of every member. The pastor became mobile and went to every sheep, instead of waiting to see whether the sheep would come to him.⁸ Calvin himself took this task very seriously—such was his commitment that he offered himself

⁶ To Elizabeth I, CO 17:414–15.

⁷ John Calvin, *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* (1541), CO 10:17. Something similar can be seen in Calvin's 1537 Catechism. See also Mark Ryan, "The Pastoral Theology of John Calvin," *The Burning Bush* 6.1 (2000): 32–47; W. S. Reid, "John Calvin, Pastoral Theologian," *The Reformed Theological Review* 41.3 (1982): 68–70; R. J. de Vries, "Individueel Pastoraat bij Calvijn," *Theologia Reformata* 54.1 (2011): 27–43.

⁸ Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvijn een Mens* (Kampen: Kok, 2008), 114.

to visit the sick during the plague, even when the city council of Geneva forbade him to do so.⁹ For Calvin, however, visiting could also be done in other ways, and the flock was often much broader than only the believers in Geneva. For Calvin “visiting the flock”—that is, taking pastoral care of believers—could also be done through his writings, chiefly the *Institutes*,¹⁰ tracts,¹¹ and letters.¹² “He was often asked to pastor persons from a distance ... and he did so willingly and thoroughly.”¹³ This pastoral care from a distance did not exclude kings, queens, or other rulers—after all, they were also part of the flock and worthy to be cared for.¹⁴

As a result of the positions rulers hold, Calvin’s pastoral care of them necessarily has its own emphasis and color. Calvin views these rulers not primarily as individual members of a congregation but as holders of an office, and their reign as part of and subject to the kingdom of Christ. This framework is important to an understanding of his pastoral approach to these royal dedicatees.

Calvin identifies at least three periods of the kingdom of Christ: its beginning, its progress, and its consummation.¹⁵ The beginning is located particularly at the time of the ascension of Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the proclamation of the gospel by the apostles.¹⁶ The consummation, though sometimes located in the apostolic era, is generally referred to as the last day.¹⁷ Between the beginning and the consummation, Calvin sees the progress of the kingdom: “From the perspective of the sixteenth century he can look back at its beginnings, and forward to its consummation; between these two points, he can chart its inexorable progress.”¹⁸ And it is

⁹ Ryan, “The Pastoral Theology of John Calvin,” 41.

¹⁰ See Shawn D. Wright, “John Calvin as Pastor,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13.4 (2009): 4–17.

¹¹ See Thapelo Khumalo, “Calvin’s Reply to Sadolet as an Extension of His Pastoral Ministry,” *Koers* 82.2 (2017), doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.82.2.2346.

¹² See Raymond Potgieter, “Discerning Calvin’s Pastoral Care from His Letters,” *In die Skriflig* 48.1 (2014), doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i1.1830.

¹³ Wright, “John Calvin as Pastor,” 5.

¹⁴ See Samuel Cardwell, “‘What Sort of Love Will Not Speak for a Friend’s Good?’: Pastoral Care and Rhetoric in Early Anglo-Saxon Letters to Kings,” *Journal of Medieval History* 45.4 (2019): 405–31.

¹⁵ See Pete Wilcox, “Evangelization in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin,” *Anvil* 12.3 (1995): 201–17; Pete Wilcox, “Calvin as Commentator on the Prophets,” in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 121–30; Herman Hendrik van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church: A Study of the Implications of the Pneumatology for the Ecclesiology in John Calvin’s Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 64–72.

¹⁶ Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 71.

¹⁷ Wilcox, “Calvin as Commentator on the Prophets,” 122–23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

on this continuum between beginning and consummation that Calvin can place the kings and the queens whom he addresses—they have a particular role to play in the “inexorable progress” of the kingdom of Christ; their kingdoms are taken up in the grand scheme of his kingdom.

Calvin makes this more concrete when he closely relates the progress of the kingdom in the sixteenth century with the progress (and restoration) of the (Reformed) church: “In the first place, Calvin considered the progress of Christ’s Kingdom to consist in the establishment of reformed (or ‘true’) churches, where none existed.”¹⁹ The progress of the kingdom and the restoration of the church lie on the same continuum from beginning to consummation. It is in this regard that Calvin deems the role of rulers to be of the utmost importance—in his dedicatory letters and his private correspondence he often commends kings and rulers for their zeal for the progress of the kingdom of Christ and the restoration of the church, or he reminds them of their responsibility for it.²⁰ Two examples among many will suffice. In his dedicatory letter to his commentary on Acts (1552), addressed to Christian III, king of Denmark, Calvin writes,

I thought it would be suitable to connect you with the narrative of that history, which embraces the very beginning of the Christian church, right from its actual birth, and then its advances and increases, so that the precise resemblance of the reborn church, which the Lord has committed to your protection, may encourage you more and more in the right course of duty.²¹

When, in 1560, he rededicates the commentary on Acts to Duke Nicolaus Radziwil,²² he writes:

Indeed, most illustrious Prince, again I must ask you, even implore you both privately to yield yourself completely to the sovereignty of Christ, in accordance with the auspicious beginnings you made before, and to be not only a faithful and indefatigable helper, but also a standard-bearer, in advancing the kingdom of Christ.²³

These examples sum up well how Calvin approached the pastoral care that he extended to kings, queens, and rulers. They are important role-players in the progress of the kingdom of Christ and the restoration of the church

¹⁹ Wilcox, “Evangelization in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin,” 213.

²⁰ For examples, see Wilcox, “Evangelization in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin,” 213.

²¹ Helmut Feld, *Commentariorum in Acta Apostolorum*, COR XII.1 (Geneva: Droz, 2001), lxix–lxx (hereafter, COR).

²² For more on this rededication, see Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 43–45.

²³ COR XII.1:6.

in their respective territories. And in that particular office they need to be praised, encouraged, implored, and in some cases even reprimanded. They are to be reminded constantly that they serve Christ and his kingdom in executing their high office. This framework determines the topics that Calvin addresses in his correspondence with them, also in the dedicatory letters.

II. *Dedicatory Letters—General*

Before moving on to how Calvin used the dedications to pastor kings and queens, a few words on his dedications in general are in order. Dedicatory letters, as a particular literary genre, were used for almost two centuries after the second half of the fifteenth century.²⁴ What made these dedicatory letters so unique was that they were personal letters read by a large audience—therefore, they combine the characteristics of a private letter with the standards of a public document.²⁵ Calvin wrote thirty-three such dedicatory letters.²⁶ Within this group of thirty-three, Gilmont identifies three different types of dedicatees: private individuals (e.g., teachers, colleagues, and friends), rulers (e.g., kings, queen, princes, and city councils), and religious authorities (e.g., groups of pastors); there is also one collective dedication addressed to “all the faithful servants of God who want the reign of Christ to be properly established in France.”²⁷ The next section will focus on the second category of dedicatees: rulers.²⁸ The exact number of dedications in this category is hard to establish because Calvin, on more than one occasion, rededicated some of his works as a result of a negative response by the initial dedicatee.²⁹ Depending on how one counts, then, the number of

²⁴ Ulrich Maché, “Author and Patron: On the Functions of Dedications in Seventeenth-Century German Literature,” in *Literary Culture in the Holy Roman Empire, 1555–1720*, ed. James A. Parente, Richard Erich Schade, and George C. Schoolfield (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 195–205; Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* 72 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 195–212.

²⁵ Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 195.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 307–8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 198–202.

²⁸ A full list of the dedications in this category is given at the start of the next section.

²⁹ This happens in the case of his commentary on Acts—the first part was dedicated to Christian III, king of Denmark (1552), and the second part to his son, Fredrick II (1554); the entire commentary in one volume was rededicated to Prince Nicolaus Radziwil of Poland (1560). Also, Calvin’s commentary on Genesis, initially dedicated to the sons of Duke Johann-Friedrich of Saxony (1554), was in 1563 republished together with a harmony of the other four books of Moses and rededicated to Henri de Vendôme, future King Henri IV of France. In addition, Calvin’s dedication of his *Institutes* to King Francis I is not considered in this article, as this is not a dedication in the typical sense—it is unlikely that Calvin ever asked

dedications in this category ranges between eleven and fifteen. These are the dedications that will be investigated in the following section.

It is interesting to note that almost all dedications to rulers can be dated between 1548 and 1563, whereas the dedications addressed to private individuals generally appear during the preceding years, 1539 to 1550. This fact most probably has to do with Calvin's increasing influence on the European religious scene.³⁰ It shows that, when Calvin started dedicating his works to kings, queens, and princes, there was no great need to garner their favor and financial support, though he did hope for a certain amount of publicity for his works;³¹ he also did not need to make use of excessive flattery, as was often the case with dedicatory letters, though he was generally lavish in his compliments. Calvin had a different aim with his dedications—from their content it can be seen that his aim

was specifically to encourage his correspondents to pursue the work of the Reformation, or to make them receptive to the Calvinist cause. His intention was to be a spur ... in the defence of the true faith.³²

This is also how Calvin's colleague and successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, explained their purpose: "As for his other dedications intended for certain kings or princes or governments, his aim was to use these means to encourage some to persevere in the protection of the children of God, and to encourage the others to do the same."³³ This goal corresponds with the framework of the kingdom laid out in the previous section. In several instances these dedicatory letters also afforded Calvin the opportunity to comment on current affairs.³⁴

III. *Pastoral Care in the Dedications to Rulers*

For the sake of overview, and to prevent unnecessary repetition, here is a list of the dedicatory letters that are relevant to this study (together with the date on which Calvin wrote them, for which commentary they were intended, and where they can be found in the published works of Calvin):

for the king's approval, intended him to read it, or sent him a copy; therefore, one cannot properly speak of pastoral care in this letter.

³⁰ Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 198.

³¹ See, e.g., CO 13:281; CO 17:445.

³² Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 207.

³³ CO 21:36.

³⁴ Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 209–10.

1. To Christopher, the duke of Württemberg (February 1, 1548, commentary on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, *CO* 12:658–59);
2. To Edward, the duke of Somerset (July 25, 1548, commentary on First and Second Timothy, *CO* 13:16–18);
3. To Sigismund-Augustus, king of Poland (May 23, 1549, commentary on Hebrews, *CO* 13:281–86);
4. To Edward VI, king of England (December 25, 1550, commentary on Isaiah, *CO* 13:669–74); later a dedication was added to Elizabeth I, queen of England (January 15, 1559, *CO* 17:413–15);
5. To Edward VI (January 24, 1551, commentary on the Catholic Epistles, *CO* 14:30–37);
6. To Christian III, king of Denmark (March 29, 1552, commentary on Acts I, *COR* XII.1); to Frederick II, his son (January 25, 1554, commentary on Acts II, *COR* XII.1); later rededicated to Nicolaus Radziwil, duke of Lithuania (August 1, 1560, commentary on Acts, *COR* XII.1:3–10);
7. To the Small Council of Geneva (January 1, 1553, commentary on John, *CO* 47:iv–vi);
8. To the sons of Johann-Friedrich, the duke of Saxony (July 31, 1554, commentary on Genesis, *CO* 15:196–201); later rededicated to Henri de Vendôme, future King Henri IV (July 31, 1563, commentary on the five books of Moses, *CO* 20:116–22);
9. To the city council of Frankfurt (August 1, 1555, commentary on the harmony of the Gospels, *CO* 15:710–12);
10. To Gustavus I, king of Sweden (January 26, 1559, commentary on the minor prophets, *CO* 17:445–48);
11. To Frederick III, elector Palatine (July 23, 1563, commentary on Jeremiah and Lamentations, *CO* 20:72–79).

What can be learned from these dedications in terms of Calvin's pastoral approach? How did he care for these rulers? Within the framework outlined above, this article will identify the following four themes.

1. *Encouragement to Restore the Church*

As has already been noted, Calvin's main aim in his pastoral care for rulers is to encourage them in their office to continue in (or take up) the right course of restoring true religion and pure worship. The basis for Calvin's encouragement is his conviction that establishing and restoring (*fundandae*

et instaurandae) the church is ultimately God's work.³⁵ When we repair the ruins of the church, we give our labors to the Lord in obedience to his laws and injunctions, and yet the restoration of the church is his own work.³⁶ It is God who has, in the time of the Reformation, given the doctrine of the gospel in greater purity to the world—the earthly ruler is merely the defender and protector (*patronum ac vindicem*) of that very doctrine.³⁷ Therefore, when we undertake to promote the doctrine of salvation and the well-being of the church, aid from heaven will be given us.³⁸ It is from this solid theological basis that the Reformer can encourage and exhort his dedicatees to do this work of restoring the church. A brief summary of this from the respective dedicatory letters will suffice.

Calvin praises Christopher, the duke of Württemberg, for pursuing the right course with great spirit and energy. However, in the current distress of the church, Calvin feels that it is necessary to strengthen the duke's resolution.³⁹ Calvin is probably referring here to Emperor Charles V's victory over the Schmalkaldic League in April 1547, which would eventually lead to the Augsburg Interim.⁴⁰ Amid this storm, while others had been shaken or thrown down, the duke had preserved composure, moderation, and steadfastness. Therefore, Calvin considers him an example of someone who has chosen to fight under the banner of the cross rather than to triumph with the world.⁴¹ Later that same year Calvin writes to Edward, the duke of Somerset and tutor for the young King Edward VI.⁴² Despite numerous difficulties, the duke has made the restoration (*instaurandae*) of religion his priority—he has allowed the Son of God to rule in England again. By restoring the true doctrine of godliness, banishing idols, and setting up pure worship, he has put the kingdom of England on a solid basis. The letters to Timothy (and by implication Calvin's commentary on them) will provide the duke with the pattern to continue this work and will help him guide the many Timothys under his charge.⁴³

When writing to King Sigismund-Augustus of Poland, Calvin expresses the hope that his commentary on Hebrews will serve as an encouragement to the king, who is already engaged in the work of restoring (*instaurandum*)

³⁵ To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:286.

³⁶ To Edward VI, CO 13:672.

³⁷ To Edward, CO 13:17.

³⁸ To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:286.

³⁹ To Christopher, CO 12:658–59.

⁴⁰ Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 33–34.

⁴¹ To Christopher, CO 12:659.

⁴² To Edward, CO 13:16–18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

the kingdom of Christ—because the happiness of the kingdom of Poland will only be established when Christ is its chief ruler and governor.⁴⁴ Calvin assures the king that it is not inconsistent with his high position to submit his scepter to Christ. This kind of obedience can only be rendered when the whole of religion is reformed according to Christ's holy doctrine. Calvin compares the king, who is restoring the pure teaching of the gospel to the kingdom of Poland, to Old Testament kings like Hezekiah and Josiah.⁴⁵

After writing to Edward VI's tutor, Calvin subsequently writes to the young king himself.⁴⁶ From Isaiah's prophecy (the commentary on which is dedicated to the king), he touches on the subject of the restoration of the church—he shows that this restoration already started at the return from the exile but was far exceeded by the coming of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. Calvin then takes his dedicatee on a brief tour through the history of the church—the spreading of the gospel throughout the whole world, the persecutions during the first centuries, the conversion of the Roman empire, the desolation of the church during the Middle Ages, the destruction under the Roman Antichrist, until the Reformation, during which time God started to raise up what had fallen.⁴⁷ Calvin then calls on the king to carry forward the restoration of the church, which has been so successfully begun in his kingdom. From Isaiah 49:23 Calvin calls the king a nursing father of the church, just as he would later call Queen Elizabeth a nursing mother.⁴⁸ A month later he would again write to the same king, this time calling on him to follow Moses's directive of having a copy of the law at hand.⁴⁹

In dedicating his commentary on Acts to Radziwil, Calvin encourages the duke that, just as he had embraced the pure teaching in the beginning, he should go on until the end and not grow weary in this sacred warfare.⁵⁰ It is, therefore, profitable to look at the origin of the church as Luke describes it in Acts—Calvin connects this beginning of the church in Acts to the beginning of the church in Radziwil's land and encourages him to advance the kingdom of Christ, especially among the nobles in his land.⁵¹

In writing to the Small Council of Geneva, Calvin praises the goodness of God by which the Genevans have fixed the anchor of their faith in the truth of God. However, knowing the city and its inhabitants intimately, Calvin

⁴⁴ To Sigismund-Augustus, *CO* 13:282.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁴⁶ To Edward VI, *CO* 13:669–74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 671–72.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 672–73.

⁴⁹ To Edward VI, *CO* 14:37.

⁵⁰ To Radziwil, *COR* XII.1:4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

notices that too many of the Roman pollutions still remain. True, God has restored purity of doctrine, pure worship, and faithful administration of the sacraments, but reformation of conduct and of life has yet to be attained.⁵² This contains the implicit call for the council to take this task in hand.

For a long time, Calvin wanted to dedicate a work to the elector Palatine, Frederick III, and this desire finally materialized in his commentary on Jeremiah. In it, Calvin wants to encourage the elector, who has embraced the sound doctrine, especially with regard to the Lord's Supper, but this has caused great uproar in his territory. Some even accuse him of Calvinism.⁵³ Calvin exhorts the elector to persevere in his course by dedicating to him his commentary on Jeremiah. To Henri de Vendôme, Calvin writes that God has given him a sincere and ingenuous profession of faith from which he has not swerved—he is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. For this Calvin congratulates him, but he also exhorts him to stay in this faith in the future.⁵⁴ Just as was the case with young King Edward VI, Calvin advises the equally young Henri to follow Moses's directive of having a copy of the law at hand. This will help him form good habits from a tender age and avoid the pleasures that the royal court offers him.⁵⁵

From this brief summary it is clear that Calvin's pastoral aim in his dedicatory letters is to encourage and exhort the earthly rulers to continue in their personal profession of faith—but more importantly, to continue in their office of restoring the church and true worship. Although he occasionally mentions personal details, his focus is on pastoring these rulers in the office to which they have been called. He does this to each dedicatee in his or her own circumstances, and for this purpose he did some research into each one's circumstances, whether by reading about them or consulting with acquaintances.⁵⁶ However, the golden thread in Calvin's pastoral ministry to each of his dedicatees is his continuous encouragement to restore the church with the aid of God.

2. *True Doctrine*

Pastoring is a form of proclaiming the word, the true doctrine. Calvin time and again pastors his dedicatees by proclaiming the word and focusing them on it.

⁵² To the Small Council of Geneva, *CO* 47:v.

⁵³ To Frederick III, *CO* 20:72.

⁵⁴ To Henri de Vendôme, *CO* 20:116.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

⁵⁶ Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 207.

On the one hand, Calvin shows in a general sense that the restoration of the church implies a return to true doctrine. All of his dedicatees are praised for having restored the true doctrine of godliness (*restituatur genuina pietatis doctrina*) in their territories and encouraged to continue doing it.⁵⁷ Those who promote the doctrine of salvation (*salutis doctrinam*) and the well-being of the church can expect aid from heaven.⁵⁸ God will be the Guardian of those cities where the doctrine of the gospel remains⁵⁹ because purity of doctrine is the soul of the church.⁶⁰

On the other hand, Calvin does not hesitate to address specific doctrines. His commentary on Hebrews, he says to Sigismund-Augustus, sets forth the whole power and work of Christ: his eternal divinity, his government, and his unique priesthood. This will be very beneficial to the king, who is well known for his zeal for the doctrine of Christ.⁶¹ Calvin discusses his understanding of the Lord's Supper at length in his letter to Frederick III—how the substance of Christ's flesh and blood is our spiritual life, communicated to us under the symbols of bread and wine.⁶² Calvin also gives a whole list of doctrines when denouncing the Council of Trent to Edward VI: the depravity of human nature, the miserable and lost state of humankind, the grace and power of Christ, the free nature of our salvation, and the sacraments.⁶³

Thus, after having praised and commended his dedicatees for their work in restoring the church and true worship in their respective territories, Calvin gives them the necessary tools to continue on this course. He shows them the nature of the soul of the church, by which it is kept alive: true and pure doctrine, as found in the word of God. It is therefore no surprise that Calvin, as shown in the previous paragraph, encourages several of his dedicatees to keep a copy of the law (i.e., the word) at hand. It is also interesting to see that, in several instances, he commends his dedicatees for following a liberal education in the Latin language and for reading good books. The duke of Württemberg, for example, has one big advantage in his endeavor to restore the church: he has had a liberal education and has the leisure to read profitable and religious books from which he can draw consolation in the present time of distress for the church.⁶⁴ King Gustavus's son, Heric, is

⁵⁷ To Edward, CO 13:17.

⁵⁸ To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:286.

⁵⁹ To the Small Council of Geneva, CO 47:iv.

⁶⁰ To Radziwil, COR XII.1:8; for more on doctrine as the soul of the church, see Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 186–88.

⁶¹ To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:281–82.

⁶² To Frederick III, CO 20:73.

⁶³ To Edward VI, CO 14:35.

⁶⁴ To Christopher, CO 12:659.

similarly praised: he has made such progress in the liberal sciences that he had consecrated in his palace a sanctuary, not only to the heathen muses but also to celestial philosophy (i.e., the wisdom of Scripture).⁶⁵ Calvin also expresses the hope to Queen Elizabeth I that, after the short period of oppression of pure doctrine under Mary I, all orthodox books may again be welcomed and circulated in England—and that through them she would promote true religion. Calvin speaks from experience: he knows that his commentary on Isaiah, initially dedicated to Edward VI and now also dedicated to Elizabeth, was banished under Mary, to the deep sorrow of many godly people.⁶⁶

Reading—reading of the word, in which is found the pure doctrine, and reading orthodox books—is the very practical tool that Calvin offers pastorally to his dedicatees. It is through reading the word and good religious books that pure and holy doctrine can be restored, without which the church will be a body without a soul.

3. Identifying Heresies

Heresy is the other side of the coin of true doctrine. This matter is an important part of Calvin's pastoral ministry to his dedicatees, who are called to uphold true doctrine by identifying and warning against prevailing heresies. This helps them in their calling.

Calvin's focus in identifying heresy is, unsurprisingly, mainly on the Papists. In most of his dedicatory letters he warns against the Papists by name, often referring to them as the Antichrist. For too long, true doctrine has been crushed and buried by the tyranny of the Roman Antichrist, and the church has been corrupted by the wickedness of Popery.⁶⁷ This state has led to the pollution of worship, the doctrine of faith, the sacraments, church government, and the power of Christ.⁶⁸ At times Calvin gives the Papists a very recognizable face. Twice, for example, he mentions the Council of Trent meeting in sessions during that period—he does not want King Edward VI or Duke Radziwil to ascribe any value to this fictitious council, as they are not gathering under the guidance of the Spirit but under the authority of Antichrist.⁶⁹ Calvin has no hope that from Trent a church will suddenly emerge, for there is no comparison between the church and the pope's

⁶⁵ To Gustavus I, *CO* 17:448.

⁶⁶ To Elizabeth I, *CO* 17:414.

⁶⁷ To Edward, *CO* 13:17–18.

⁶⁸ To Sigismund-Augustus, *CO* 13:283.

⁶⁹ To Edward VI, *CO* 14:30–37; to Radziwil, *COR* XII.1:9–10.

synagogue.⁷⁰ In another instance Calvin refers to the Roman theologian Johannes Eck by name. Years earlier Eck had written a book on the mass as sacrifice, dedicating it to Sigismund I of Poland. Therefore, “when Calvin wrote on Hebrews he dedicated his work to Sigismund II in an explicit attempt to refute Eck’s work ... by emphasizing the once-for-all quality, the non-repeatability, of the sacrifice of Christ.”⁷¹ Calvin also refers to Desiderius Erasmus as an example of someone who scorns the Reformers and considers it impossible to destroy Popery.⁷²

But there were other adversaries. Calvin warns Radziwil against the anti-trinitarian ideas of Franciscus Stancarum and George Blandrata.⁷³ He expresses his gratitude to Frederick III for embracing the sound doctrine concerning the Lord’s Supper and not holding to the gnesio-Lutheran teaching of the ubiquity (*ubiquitatis*) of Christ’s humanity, even though these adversaries accuse him of Calvinism (*Calvinismus*).⁷⁴ And he makes Prince Henri, duke of Vendôme, aware of certain morose professors of the gospel who continuously disturb the peace in the church, as well as other writers who make everything in Scripture a matter of doubt.⁷⁵

Truth and falsehood, light and darkness—Calvin shepherds his dedicatees in both, attuned to the circumstances of each, thereby equipping them to fulfill their office and helping them to hold on to Christ, the Sun of Righteousness.⁷⁶

4. *Current Affairs*

As was true for many dedications during that time, Calvin also uses his dedicatory letters to address current affairs.⁷⁷ Pastoral care, after all, takes place in the very concrete circumstances of every day. As already stated, Calvin does not really delve into the personal circumstances of his royal dedicatees, but he does address the current affairs that pertain to their office. This included identifying heresies, as has been outlined, and referring (sometimes vaguely) to the political circumstances of the day.

However, the issue that resurfaces most often in Calvin’s dedicatory letters to rulers is the question of religious refugees and their acceptance by

⁷⁰ To Radziwil, COR XII.1:10.

⁷¹ Gary Neal Hansen, “Calvin as Commentator on Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles,” in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. McKim, 259.

⁷² To Edward VI, CO 13:672.

⁷³ To Radziwil, COR XII.1:7–8; for more on Stancarum and Blandrata, see Arie Baars, *Om Gods Verhevenheid en Zijn Nabijheid* (Kampen: Kok, 2004), 236–42, 256–58.

⁷⁴ To Frederick III, CO 20:72–73.

⁷⁵ To Henri de Vendôme, CO 20,120–21.

⁷⁶ To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:285; to Edward VI, CO 13:671.

⁷⁷ See Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 209–10.

the dedicatees. This issue was close to Calvin's heart, as he himself was an exile in more than one way, and he often ministered to exiles.⁷⁸ In addition, the period of the Reformation in which Calvin wrote his dedications to rulers (1548 onwards) was what Heiko Oberman termed "the Reformation of the refugees."⁷⁹ This phase began after the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League (1547), when cities were recatholicized and Protestant believers had to flee. These events had such an influence on Calvin that in his commentary on Isaiah 16:4 he could make the following exhortation and bold statement: "Let us therefore learn from this passage to be kind and dutiful to fugitives, and especially to believers, who are banished for their confession of the word. No duty can be more pleasing or acceptable to God."⁸⁰

In dedicating his commentary on the Gospel of John to the Small Council of Geneva, Calvin does not waste any time before addressing the matter of the refugees.⁸¹ The refugee question was, after all, very pressing in Geneva during those years.⁸² Calvin does not afford the council unreserved praise for accepting religious refugees, which reflects something of the tense relationship between Calvin and the council before 1555, but he rather shows "the extraordinary honour which [God] has been pleased to confer on you, by making your city the resort [*hospitium*], not of one or a few individuals, but of his church at large."⁸³ Being inhospitable was considered, among the heathens, a part of being barbarian or savage. But now, Calvin tells the council, the "angels bless you from heaven, and the children of God bless you from every quarter of the world."⁸⁴

In the only other dedication to a city council, this time to the council of Frankfurt, Calvin is more open in his praise.⁸⁵ Again referring to the calamitous situation following the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League, he praises the council for standing firm in an open profession of the faith and for maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness. Not only did they show their faith openly toward their own citizens, but they also received "as torn members those fragments of a dispersed church which had been thrown out

⁷⁸ See Robert R. Vosloo, "The Displaced Calvin: 'Refugee Reality' as a Lense to Re-examine Calvin's Life, Theology and Legacy," *Religion and Theology* 16 (2009): 35–52.

⁷⁹ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 217–20.

⁸⁰ *CO* 36:303.

⁸¹ To the Small Council of Geneva, *CO* 47:iv–vi.

⁸² See William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 121–39.

⁸³ To the Small Council of Geneva, *CO* 47:iv.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, v.

⁸⁵ To the city council of Frankfurt, *CO* 15:710–12.

in other countries.”⁸⁶ Exiles from England and other places were received with warm hospitality in Frankfurt, and the gospel was even preached in the foreign languages of these refugees. Calvin calls this “sacred hospitality” (*sancta hospitalitas*), and it is the direct cause for dedicating his commentary on the harmony of the Gospels to the city council.⁸⁷

Queen Elizabeth I is not so much praised as implored to discharge her duty of gathering the exiles, especially after they were banished from England during the reign of Queen Mary I:

This will be the crowning proof of your gratitude to God, and a sacrifice of most delightful savor, that the faithful worshipers of God, who, on account of their profession of faith, were constrained to wander far and wide through distant countries, shall now, through your kindness, be restored to their native country.⁸⁸

At the end of the dedication of his commentary on Jeremiah to the elector Palatine Frederick III, Calvin expresses his gratitude to the elector for receiving the Christian refugees who have fled to him. He knows what he is talking about because, he writes, “Thirty years have passed away since my voluntary exile from France, because the truth of the gospel, pure religion, and the true worship of God were exiled from there.”⁸⁹ Calvin calls on the elector not to be discouraged by exiles who have deceived him—he specifically discusses the case of a certain François Baudouin—but to look at the advantages that he has received from qualified men at the University of Heidelberg.⁹⁰

From the more primary matters of restoration, truth, and heresy, Calvin also takes the time to pastorally address current affairs, especially the very pressing and relevant matter of religious refugees. He is fully aware of the position of his dedicatees; he knows that they have the power to address the plight of these exiles. And he does not shy away from reminding them of this—sometimes couched in the language of praise, but the message would have been clear to the receivers. Calvin’s pastoral heart, both for his dedicatees and for the refugees themselves, shines through in this matter.

Conclusion

I started this article with a reference to Queen Elizabeth II—her personal faith and those who pastored her. I want to finish with a reference to

⁸⁶ Ibid., 711.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ To Elizabeth I, *CO* 17:415.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 78–79.

another contemporary world leader, Vladimir Putin, and the one who, by all accounts, pastors him—Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. The contrast between Elizabeth and Putin, but even more importantly between the pastoral visions of Kirill and Calvin, could not be starker. Whereas Calvin saw kings and queens, and their kingdoms, in the framework of the kingdom of Christ, Putin and Kirill work with the Justinian concept of *symphonia*—a symphony between church and state.⁹¹ This creates harmony—not between two independent powers, but of a single human society, for which the emperor is ultimately responsible.

In Russia this vision has led to a relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin that has grown so close that in 2012, Kirill could describe Putin as a miracle from God. During a meeting in 2017 in Moscow, Putin praised the Russian Orthodox Church for her contribution to the Russian people and to the Christian civilization in Russia's history. In turn, the patriarch thanked Putin for the open dialogue between the church and the government—this would inevitably lead to the fatherland's success in both the near and the distant future.⁹² And in October 2022, during the ongoing war in Ukraine, Kirill said that Putin's reign over Russia had been mandated by God: "God put you in power so that you could perform a service of special importance and of great responsibility for the fate of the country and the people entrusted to your care." The patriarch praised Putin for "transforming the image of Russia, strengthening its sovereignty and its defence capability, protecting its national interests."⁹³

This is something very different from Calvin's pastoral care for rulers in the framework of the kingdom of Christ. The highest priority for Putin and Kirill is the fatherland, its past and its future, its success and its sovereignty—though it must be said that the Russian Orthodox Church's place in this history is not to be neglected. Calvin's framework, however, keeps kings, queens, and other rulers focused on their place on the continuum of the heavenly kingdom of Christ from its beginning until its consummation. It keeps them humble in their high office of restoring the church; it reminds

⁹¹ Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Church and State in the Orthodox World: From the Byzantine 'Symphonia' and Nationalized Orthodoxy, to the Need of Witnessing the Word of God in a Pluralistic Society," in *Religioni Liberta, Potere Atti del Convegno Internazionale Filosofico-Teologico Sulla Liberta Religiosa*, ed. Emanuela Fogliadini (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2014), 39–74.

⁹² Herman H. van Alten, "Een symfonie in Poetins hoofd," *Nader Bekeken* 27 (2020): 59–63, <https://www.woordenwereld.nl/files/geregistreerd/NaderBekeken2020/NB%20februari%202020.pdf>.

⁹³ *The Moscow Times*, "'God Put You in Power': Russian Orthodox Leader Tells Putin on 70th Birthday," October 7, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/10/07/god-put-you-in-power-russian-orthodox-leader-tells-putin-on-70th-birthday-a79020>.

them of their task of aiding the progress of the kingdom by upholding the biblical doctrine and fighting heresy. Calvin is not fazed by the personal ambitions of earthly rulers—he simply shows them the way to follow—for the true doctrine and against heresy. This is not done in a detached and theoretical manner; rather, it takes account of current affairs and circumstances in any given territory.

Calvin's vision for the pastoral care of earthly rulers can, therefore, be summed up with the title of this article: the progress of the kingdom. Within this vision the Reformer encourages rulers to restore the church and true worship, hold on to true doctrine, fight against heresy, and in all of this be mindful of current affairs.