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## BOOK FOUR

### *The External Means or Aims by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein*

#### CHAPTER I

#### THE TRUE CHURCH<sup>1</sup> WITH WHICH AS MOTHER OF ALL THE GODLY WE MUST KEEP UNITY

*(The Holy Catholic Church, our mother, 1-4)*

##### 1. *The necessity of the church*

<sup>e</sup>As explained in the previous book, it is by the faith in the gospel that Christ becomes ours and we are made partakers of the salvation and eternal blessedness brought by him. Since, however, in our ignorance and sloth (to which I add fickleness of disposition) we need outward helps to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal, God has also added these aids that he may provide for our weakness. <sup>e(b)</sup>And in order that the preaching

<sup>1</sup> The space accorded by Calvin to the doctrine of the church in the *Institutes* is evidence of the high importance it assumed for him. Yet until our century this part of his theology has attracted little attention from his interpreters. The following list of titles may serve to illustrate the now widening interest in his treatment of the church: Th. Werdermann, "Calvins Lehre von der Kirche in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung" in *Calvinstudien*, pp. 236-338; Doumergue, *Calvin* V; L. Goumaz, *La Doctrine du salut*, pp. 312-336; A. Lecerf, "La Doctrine de l'Église dans Calvin," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie religieuses* IX (1929), 256-270; P. Barth, "Calvins Verständnis der Kirche," *Zwischen den Zeiten* VIII. 216-233; P. Imbart de la Tour, *Les Origines de la Réforme* IV. 98-113; H. R. Percy, *The Meaning of the Church in the Thought of Calvin*; R. C. Petry, "Calvin's Conception of the 'Communio Sanctorum,'" *Church History* V (1936), 227-238; P. T. Fuhrmann,

of the gospel might flourish, he deposited this treasure in the church. "He instituted 'pastors and teachers' [Eph. 4:11] through whose lips he might teach his own; he furnished them with authority; finally, he omitted nothing that might make for holy agreement of faith and for right order. First of all, he instituted sacraments, which we who have experienced them feel to be highly useful aids to foster and strengthen faith. Shut up as we are in the prison house of our flesh, we have not yet attained angelic rank. God, therefore, in his wonderful providence accommodating himself to our capacity, has prescribed a way for us, though still far off, to draw near to him.

Accordingly, our plan of instruction now requires us to discuss the church, its government, orders, and power; then the sacraments; and lastly, the civil order.<sup>2</sup> At the same time we are to call back godly readers from those corruptions by which Satan, in the papacy, has polluted everything God had appointed for our salvation.

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. "For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder" [Mark 10:9 p.], so that, for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother.<sup>3</sup> And this was so not only under the law but also after Christ's coming, as Paul testifies when he teaches that we are the children of the new and heavenly Jerusalem [Gal. 4:26].

## 2. What is the relationship of church and creed?

"The article in the Creed in which we profess to 'believe the

*God-centered Religion*, ch. vi; J. T. McNeill, "The Church in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology," *Journal of Religion* XXII (1942), 251-269; W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, ch. 13; LCC XXIII. 361-406 (selections from the Commentaries); W. Mueller, *Church and State in Luther and Calvin*, pp. 77-125; G. MacGregor, *Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church According to the Reformed Tradition*.

<sup>2</sup> Book IV is outlined in this sentence. Throughout, the church is treated as the divine institution to assemble and minister to the elect in the earthly condition in which they are, as stated in the previous sentence, "*ergastulo carnis . . . inclusi*," "shut in the prison of the flesh." Cf. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Loci communes*, 1576 edition, "*Simplex expositio*" 35, p. 484.

<sup>3</sup> "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother." Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* vi (CSEL 3. i. 214; tr. LCC V. 127 f.); Augustine, *Psalms*, Ps. 88. ii. 14 (MPL 37. 1140; tr. LF *Psalms* IV. 269 f.); *Against the Writings of Petilianus* III. ix. 10 (MPL 43. 353); Pseudo-Augustine, *On the Creed (De Symbolo)* iv. 13 (MPL 40. 668). On early parallels, see J. H. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesiae*, ch. iii.

church" refers not only to the visible church (our present topic) but also to all God's elect, in whose number are also included the dead. The word "believe" is used because often no other distinction can be made between God's children and the ungodly, between his own flock and wild beasts. <sup>(b)</sup>There is no good reason why many insert the preposition "in." I admit that it is more usual and is not without the support of antiquity, since <sup>b</sup>the Nicene Creed, as reported in the *Ecclesiastical History*, adds the preposition.<sup>4</sup> <sup>(b)</sup>Still, we should at the same time note from the writings of the fathers that in early times it was accepted as beyond controversy that people should say, "I believe the church," not "*in* the church." So <sup>(b)</sup>spoke Augustine and that ancient writer (whoever he was) whose treatise *On the Exposition of the Creed* bears Cyprian's name.<sup>5</sup> <sup>b</sup>Besides, they clearly note that to add the preposition would make it an improper expression, which opinion they confirm by substantial reasoning. We testify that we believe *in* God because our mind reposes in him as truthful, and our trust rests in him. To say "*in* the church" would be as inappropriate as "*in* the forgiveness of sins" or "*in* the resurrection of the body." Consequently, although I do not wish to dispute over words, I should prefer to use the proper phrase, one better fitted to express the matter, rather than to affect forms of speaking which needlessly obscure it.

<sup>b</sup>But the purpose is for us to know that, even though the devil moves every stone to destroy Christ's grace, and though God's enemies also rage with the same savage fury, it cannot be extinguished; nor can Christ's blood be made barren, nay, even some good may come of it. <sup>(b/a)</sup>We must thus consider both God's secret election and his inner call. For he alone "knows who are his" [II Tim. 2:19], and, as Paul says, encloses them under his seal [Eph. 1:13], except that they bear his insignia by which they may be distinguished from the reprobate. But because a small and contemptible number are hidden in a huge multitude and a few grains of wheat are covered by a pile of chaff, we must leave to God alone the knowledge of his church, whose foundation is his secret election. <sup>(b)</sup>It is not sufficient, indeed, for us to compre-

<sup>4</sup> The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is so given, not in the *Ecclesiastical History* by Eusebius, but in the *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, where the preposition *in* appears. Cf. Schaff, *Creeds* I. 22; II. 45-51, 58. The form "*in ecclesiam*" occurs in the *Tripartite History* of Cassiodorus III. 6 (MPL 69. 951). It is impossible to bring out the meaning in English, a virtually inflectionless language, of a distinction that stretches even the Latin.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *On Faith and the Creed* x. 21 (MPL 40. 193; tr. NPNF III. 331); Pseudo-Augustine, *On the Creed*, loc. cit., note 3, above; Pseudo-Cyprian (i.e., Rufinus), *On the Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* xxxvi (MPL 21. 373; tr. NPNF 2 ser. III. 557; ACW XX. 71).

hend in mind and thought the multitude of the elect, unless we consider the unity of the church as that into which we are convinced we have been truly engrafted. For no hope of future inheritance remains to us unless we have been united with all other members under Christ, our Head.

\*The church is called "catholic," or "universal," because there could not be two or three churches "unless Christ be torn asunder [cf. I Cor. 1:13]—which cannot happen! \*But all the elect are so united in Christ [cf. Eph. 1:22–23] that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together [cf. Eph. 4:16] as are the limbs of a body [Rom. 12:5; I Cor. 10:17; 12:12, 27]. They are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God. <sup>b(a)</sup>For they have been called not only into the same inheritance of eternal life but also to participate in one God and Christ [Eph. 5:30]. \*Although the melancholy desolation which confronts us on every side may cry that no remnant of the church is left, let us know that Christ's death is fruitful, and that God miraculously keeps his church as in hiding places.<sup>6</sup> So it was said to Elijah, "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee before Baal" [I Kings 19:18 p.].

### 3. "The communion of saints"

\*This article of the Creed also applies to some extent to the outward church, in that each of us should keep in brotherly agreement with all God's children, should yield to the church the authority it deserves, in short, should act as one of the flock. <sup>c(b/a)</sup>Accordingly, "the communion of saints" is added. This clause, though generally omitted by the ancients,<sup>7</sup> ought not to be overlooked, for it very well expresses what the church is. It is as if one said that the saints are gathered into the society of Christ on the principle that whatever benefits God confers upon them, they should in turn share with one another. This does not, however, rule out diversity of graces, inasmuch as we know the gifts of the Spirit are variously distributed. Nor is civil order disturbed, which allows each individual to own his private possessions, since it is necessary to keep peace among men that the ownership of property should be distinct and personal among them. But a com-

<sup>6</sup> "Quasi in latebris." The church is invisible in the sense that it is spiritual, but also in the sense that it is able at times to survive only in a hidden state. On its perpetuity, cf. II. xv. 3, note 10; Comm. Ezek. 16:53: "God always preserves a hidden seed, for there must always be a church in the world [*oportet enim semper esse ecclesia in mundum*]."

<sup>7</sup> Rufinus, *op. cit.*, xxxix (MPL 21. 377; tr. NPNF 2 ser. III. 558; ACW XX. 74); cf. W. A. Curtis, *A History of Creeds and Confessions*, pp. 61 f., 64.

munity is affirmed, such as Luke describes, in which the heart and soul of the multitude of believers are one [Acts 4:32]; 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" [Eph. 4:4 p.]. If truly convinced that God is the common Father of all and Christ the common Head, being united in brotherly love, they cannot but share their benefits with one another.

<sup>c(b)</sup>Now, it is very important for us to know what benefit we shall gain from this. The basis on which we believe the church is that we are fully convinced we are members of it. <sup>b(a)</sup>In this way our salvation rests upon sure and firm supports, so that, even if the whole fabric of the world were overthrown, the church could neither totter nor fall. \*First, it stands by God's election, and cannot waver or fail any more than his eternal providence can. <sup>b(a)</sup>Secondly, it has in a way been joined to the steadfastness of Christ, who will no more allow his believers to be estranged from him than that his members be rent and torn asunder. <sup>b</sup>Besides, we are certain that, while we remain within the bosom of the church, the truth will always abide with us. Finally, we feel that these promises apply to us: "There will be salvation in Zion" [Joel 2:32; Obad. 17, cf. Vg.]; "God will abide in the midst of Jerusalem forever, that it may never be moved" [Ps. 46:5]. So powerful is participation in the church that it keeps us in the society of God. In the very word "communion"<sup>8</sup> there is a wealth of comfort because, while it is determined that whatever the Lord bestows upon his members and ours belongs to us, our hope is strengthened by all the benefits they receive.

Yet, to embrace the unity of the church in this way, we need not (as we have said)<sup>9</sup> see the church with the eyes or touch it with the hands. Rather, the fact that it belongs to the realm of faith should warn us to regard it no less since it passes our understanding than if it were clearly visible. And our faith is no worse because it recognizes a church beyond our ken. 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,

<sup>8</sup> Calvin's thought of the functioning church as a communion in which the divine gifts are shared is close to that of Luther. Cf. Luther's *Treatise on the Sacrament and on the Brotherhoods* i. 4 (*Werke* WA II. 743; tr. *Works of Martin Luther* II. 10); McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism*, pp. 27–33, and in Rouse and Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, pp. 30 ff.; P. Althaus, *Communio Sanctorum, Die Gemeinde in Lutherischem Kirchengedanken*; R. C. Petry, as cited in sec. 1, note 1, above; G. MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. "secret election," etc., sec. 2, above.



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.

#### 4. *The visible church as mother of believers*

<sup>e6</sup>But because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title "mother"<sup>10</sup> how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels [Matt. 22:30]. "Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives." <sup>e6</sup>Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah [Isa. 37:32] and Joel [Joel 2:32] testify. Ezekiel agrees with them when he declares that those whom God rejects from heavenly life will not be enrolled among God's people [Ezek. 13:9]. On the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true godliness are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem [cf. Isa. 56:5; Ps. 87:6]. "For this reason, it is said in another psalm: "Remember me, O Jehovah, with favor toward thy people; visit me with salvation: that I may see the well-doing of thy chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the joy of thy nation, that I may be glad with thine inheritance" [Ps. 106:4-5 p.; cf. Ps. 105:4, Vg., etc.]. By these words God's fatherly favor and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church.

*(Her ministers, speaking for God, not to be despised, 5-6)*

#### 5. *Education through the church, its value and its obligation*

"But let us proceed to set forth what pertains to this topic. Paul writes that Christ, "that he might fill all things," appointed some to be "apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the

<sup>10</sup> Note that the church, here called "Mother," is the visible church, and that the mother function of the church, bearing and nourishing believers, is necessary to salvation. Cf. Cyprian, *Letters* iv. 4; lxxiii. 21 (CSEL 3. ii. 477, 795; tr. ANF V. 282, 384); Augustine, *Enchiridion* xvii. 65; "the church, . . . without whom there is no forgiveness of sins" (MPL 40. 262 f.; tr. LCC VII. 377); Augustine, *Sermons* lvi. 4, 5 (MPL 38. 379; tr. LF *Sermons* I. 69 f.); *First Epistle of John* iii. 1 (MPL 35. 1998; tr. NPNF VII. 476). In Comm. Eph. 4:13, Calvin says, "The church is the common mother of all the godly, which bears, nourishes, and brings up children to God, kings and peasants alike; and this is done by the ministry." Cf. Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 224.

ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all reach the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the measure of the fully mature age of Christ" [Eph. 4:10-13, Comm., but cf. also Vg.]. We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church. We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors. We see that all are brought under the same regulation, that with a gentle and teachable spirit they may allow themselves to be governed by teachers appointed to this function. Isaiah had long before distinguished Christ's Kingdom by this mark: "My spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall never depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or . . . of your children's children" [Isa. 59:21]. From this it follows that all those who spurn the spiritual food, divinely extended to them through the hand of the church, deserve to perish in famine and hunger. God breathes faith into us only by the instrument of his gospel, as Paul points out that "faith comes from hearing" [Rom. 10:17]. Likewise, the power to save rests with God [Rom. 1:16]; but (as Paul again testifies) He displays and unfolds it in the preaching of the gospel [*ibid.*].

By this plan He willed of old that holy assemblies be held at the sanctuary in order that the doctrine taught by the mouth of the priest might foster agreement in faith. The Temple is called God's "resting place" [Ps. 132:14]; the sanctuary, his "dwelling" [Isa. 57:15], where he is said to sit among the cherubim [Ps. 80:1]. Glorious titles, they are used solely to bring esteem, love, reverence, and dignity to the ministry of the heavenly doctrine. Otherwise, the appearance of a mortal and despised man would much detract from them. To make us aware, then, that an inestimable treasure is given us in earthen vessels [II Cor. 4:7], God himself appears in our midst, and, as Author of this order, would have men recognize him as present in his institution.

Accordingly, after he forbade his people to devote themselves to auguries, divinations, magic arts, necromancy, and other superstitions [Deut. 18:10-11; Lev. 19:31], he added that he would give what ought to suffice for all: that they should never be destitute of prophets [cf. Deut. 18:15]. But as he did not entrust the ancient folk to angels but raised up teachers from the earth truly to perform the angelic office, so also today it is his will to teach us through human means. As he was of old not content with the law alone, but added priests as interpreters from whose lips the people might ask its true meaning [cf. Mal. 2:7], so today he not only

desires us to be attentive to its reading, but also appoints instructors to help us by their effort. This is doubly useful. On the one hand, he proves 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 to thunder at us and drive us away. Indeed, from the dread with which God's majesty justly overwhelms them, all the pious truly feel how much this familiar sort of teaching is needed.

Those who think the authority of the Word is dragged down by the baseness of the men called to teach it disclose their own ungratefulness. For, among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.<sup>11</sup> Let us accordingly not in turn dislike to embrace obediently the doctrine of salvation put forth by his command and by his own mouth. For, although God's power is not bound to outward means, he has nonetheless bound us to this ordinary manner of teaching. Fanatical men, refusing to hold fast to it, entangle themselves in many deadly snares. Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. But, since they do their utmost to sever or break the sacred bond of unity, no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions. In order, then, that pure simplicity of faith may flourish among us, let us not be reluctant to use this exercise of religion which God, by ordaining it, has shown us to be necessary and highly approved. No one—not even a fanatical beast—ever existed who would tell us to close our ears to God. But in every age the prophets and godly teachers have had a difficult struggle with the ungodly, who in their stubbornness can never submit to the yoke of being taught by human word and ministry. This is like blotting out the face of God which shines upon us in teaching. Believers were bidden of old to seek the face of God in the sanctuary [Ps. 105:4], as is oftentimes repeated in

<sup>11</sup> The ministers of "the heavenly doctrine" (above) speak with God's own voice. Cf. Calvin's *Homilies on I Samuel* xlii, where the prophets and pastors of the Christian church are said to be "the very mouth of God" (CR XXXIX. 705). Such is his high doctrine of the preaching ministry; and he goes on to warn against the pride that refuses to hearken. Cf. G. MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, p. 52.

the law [Ps. 27:8; 100:2; 105:4; I Chron. 16:11; II Chron. 7:14] for no other reason than that for them the teaching of the law and the exhortations of the prophets were a living image of God, just as Paul asserts that in his preaching the glory of God shines in the face of Christ [II Cor. 4:6].

More detestable than this attitude is that of the apostates who have a passion for splitting churches, in effect driving the sheep from their fold and casting them into the jaws of wolves. We must hold to what we have quoted from Paul—that the church is built up solely by outward preaching, and that the saints are held together by one bond only: that with common accord, through learning and advancement, they keep the church order established by God [cf. Eph. 4:12]. It was especially to this end that, as I have said, in ancient times under the law all believers were commanded to assemble at the sanctuary. For while Moses speaks of God's dwelling place, at the same time the place where God has put the memory of his name he calls the "place of God's name" [cf. Ex. 20:24]. He plainly teaches thereby that there can be no use of the place apart from the doctrine of godliness. Doubtless for the same reason David complains with great bitterness of spirit that he has been barred from the Tabernacle through the tyranny and cruelty of his enemies [Ps. 84:2-3]. To many this seems almost a childish complaint, for to be denied access to the Temple would be a very slight loss, and would destroy but little pleasure, provided other delights were still at hand. Nevertheless, he laments that he burns, is tormented and well-nigh consumed, with this single trouble, vexation, and sorrow. Surely, this is because believers have no greater help than public worship, for by it God raises his own folk upward step by step.

We must observe that God always revealed himself thus to the holy patriarchs in the mirror of his teaching in order to be known spiritually. Accordingly, the Temple is called not only "the face of God" [cf. Ps. 42:2] but (to remove all cause for superstition) his "footstool" [Ps. 132:7; 99:5; I Chron. 28:2]. Happy indeed is that attainment of unity of faith [cf. Eph. 4:13] when all—from the highest to the lowest—aspire toward the Head! Whatever temples the Gentiles built for God on any other principle were a mere profanation of his worship. To a degree the Jews fell into this, though not with equal grossness. Stephen upbraided them in the words of Isaiah: "God dwells not in temples made with hands," etc. [Acts 7:48 p.; Isa. 66:1-2]. By his Word, God alone sanctifies temples to himself for lawful use. And if we rashly attempt anything without his command, strange inventions forthwith cling to the bad beginning and spread evil without measure.



Yet Xerxes, when he on the advice of his wise men rashly burned or destroyed all the temples of Greece, thought it absurd for gods, who ought to have free access to all things, to be shut up within walls and roofs.<sup>12</sup> As if it were not in God's power somehow to come down to us, in order to be near us, yet without changing place or confining us to earthly means; but rather by these to bear us up as if in chariots to his heavenly glory, a glory that fills all things with its immeasurableness and even surpasses the heavens in height!

#### 6. *Meaning and limits of the ministry*

<sup>a</sup>In our own day there has been great controversy over the efficacy of the ministry. Some exaggerate its dignity beyond measure. Others contend that what belongs to the Holy Spirit is wrongly transferred to mortal men—if we suppose that ministers and teachers penetrate into minds and hearts and so correct both blindness of mind and hardness of heart.<sup>13</sup> We must therefore correctly assess this controversy.

The points in dispute on both sides will be readily and easily resolved by expressly noting (1) the passages in which God as the author of preaching, joining his Spirit with it, promises benefits from it; (2) the passages in which God, separating himself from outward helps, claims for himself alone both the beginnings of faith and its entire course.

1. The task of the second Elijah was, according to Malachi, to enlighten the minds and “to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the unbelievers to the wisdom of the just” [Luke 1:17; Mal. 4:5–6]. Christ declares that he sends the apostles to bring forth fruit from their labor [John 15:16]. Peter briefly defines what that fruit is, saying that we are “born anew . . . of incorruptible seed” [I Peter 1:23 p.]. Paul therefore boasts that he “begat” the Corinthians “through the gospel” [I Cor. 4:15], and that they are the “seal” of his “apostleship” [I Cor. 9:2], nay, that he was no minister of the letter who only smote upon ears with the sound of his voice, but that the working of the Spirit was given him in order that his teaching might not be unprofitable [II Cor. 3:6]. In this same sense he elsewhere denies that his gospel was so much in words as in power [I Cor. 2:4]. He also affirms that the Galatians “received . . . the Spirit . . . by the hearing of faith”

<sup>12</sup> Cicero relates this, *Laws* II. x. 26 (LCL edition, pp. 405 f.).

<sup>13</sup> Editors have supposed that the above sentences characterize the attitudes of Lutherans and Zwinglians respectively. But no texts are cited for this, and it remains possible that Calvin is thinking of individual rather than of group opinions.

[Gal. 3:2]. Briefly, in many passages he not only makes himself a co-worker of God but also assigns himself the function of imparting salvation [I Cor. 3:9 ff.].

2. In mentioning all these things Paul did not intend to credit to himself even a particle apart from God. This he briefly explains elsewhere: “Our labor in the Lord was not in vain” [I Thess. 3:5 p.], “with . . . the might which he mightily inspires within me” [Col. 1:29]. Likewise: “He who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles” [Gal. 2:8]. Moreover, it is clear from other passages how he leaves nothing to ministers by themselves. “Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but it is God alone who gives the growth” [I Cor. 3:7]. Likewise: “I worked more than all; not I, but the grace of God which was with me” [I Cor. 15:10 p.]. Surely we ought to remember those statements in which God, ascribing to himself illumination of mind and renewal of heart, warns that it is sacrilege for man to claim any part of either for himself.

Meanwhile, anyone who presents himself in a teachable spirit to the ministers ordained by God shall know by the result that with good reason this way of teaching was pleasing to God, and also that with good reason this yoke of moderation was imposed on believers.

*(The visible church: its membership and the marks by which it is recognized, 7–9)*

#### 7. *Invisible and visible church*

<sup>b</sup>How we are to judge the church visible, which falls within our knowledge, is, I believe, already evident from the above discussion. <sup>c</sup>For we have said that Holy Scripture speaks of the church in two ways. Sometimes by the term “church” it means that which is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. 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. In this church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance. There

are very many ambitious, greedy, envious persons, evil speakers, and some of quite unclean life. Such are tolerated for a time either because they cannot be convicted by a competent tribunal or because a vigorous discipline does not always flourish as it ought.

Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church, invisible to us,<sup>14</sup> is visible to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, which is called "church" in respect to men.

#### 8. The limitation of our judgment

<sup>c</sup>Accordingly, the Lord by certain marks and tokens has pointed out to us what we should know about the church. <sup>a</sup>As we have cited above from Paul, to know who are His is a prerogative belonging solely to God [II Tim. 2:19].<sup>15</sup> Steps were indeed thus taken to restrain men's undue rashness; and daily events themselves remind us how far his secret judgments surpass our comprehension. For those who seemed utterly lost and quite beyond hope are by his goodness called back to the way; while those who more than others seemed to stand firm often fall. <sup>c</sup>Therefore, according to God's secret predestination (as Augustine says), "many sheep are without, and many wolves are within."<sup>16</sup> For he knows and has marked those who know neither him nor themselves. Of those who openly wear his badge, <sup>a</sup>his eyes alone see the ones who are unfeignedly holy and will persevere to the very end [Matt. 24:13]—the ultimate point of salvation.

<sup>b</sup>But on the other hand, because he foresaw it to be of some value for us to know who were to be counted as his children, he has in this regard accommodated himself to our capacity. <sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup>And, since assurance of faith was not necessary, he substituted for it a certain charitable judgment whereby we recognize as members of

<sup>14</sup> The concept of the invisible church of all the elect is present in Augustine and was habitually employed by Wycliffe. Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, *passim*; *On Baptism* III. xix. 26 (MPL 43. 152; tr. NPNF IV. 445); Wycliffe, *De ecclesia*, Wyclif Society edition, p. 37: "*Universitas fidelium praedestinatorum*"; so also Hus, *De ecclesia* I, ed. S. H. Thomson, pp. 2 f., 8; tr. D. S. Schaff, *The Church by John Hus*, pp. 3, 6; J. T. McNeill, "Some Emphases in Wyclif's Teaching," *Journal of Religion* VII (1927), 452 ff.; *Unitive Protestantism*, pp. 25 f. The idea is also familiar to such conciliarists as Dietrich of Niem (see LCC XIV. 150 f.). Luther employs similar language frequently, e.g., in his *Preface to Revelation* (*Sämmtliche Schriften* XIV [St. Louis, 1898]; tr. *Works of Martin Luther* VI. 488). Other citations from Luther and Zwingli are found in OS V. 12, note 1. Cf. J. Courvoisier, *La notion d'Eglise chez Bucer*, pp. 68 ff.; Wendel, *Calvin*, pp. 225 f.; H. Strohl, *La Pensée de la Réforme*, pp. 174–181; McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism*, pp. 39–45; Augsburg Confession, articles vii, viii.

<sup>15</sup> Sec. 2, above.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *John's Gospel* xlv. 12 (MPL 35. 1725; tr. NPNF VII. 253 f.).

the church <sup>a</sup>those who, by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>c</sup>He has, moreover, set off by plainer marks the knowledge of his very body to us, knowing how necessary it is to our salvation.

#### 9. The marks of the church and our application of them to judgment

<sup>b</sup>From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. <sup>a</sup>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 [cf. Eph. 2:20].<sup>18</sup> For his promise cannot fail: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" [Matt. 18:20].

<sup>b</sup>But that we may clearly grasp the sum of this matter, we must proceed by the following steps: the church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations; it is divided and dispersed in separate places, but agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine, and is bound by the bond of the same religion. Under it are thus included individual churches, disposed in towns and villages according to human need, so that each rightly has the name and authority of the church. Individual men who, by their profession of religion, are reckoned within such churches, even though they may actually be strangers to the church, still in a sense belong to it until they have been rejected by public judgment.

There is, however, a slightly different basis for judgment concerning individual men and churches. For it may happen that we ought to treat like brothers and count as believers those whom we think unworthy of the fellowship of the godly, because of the common agreement of the church by which they are borne and tolerated in the body of Christ. We do not by our vote approve such persons as members of the church, but we leave to them such place as they occupy among the people of God until it is lawfully taken from them.

But we must think otherwise of the whole multitude itself. If it has the ministry of the Word and honors it, if it has the administra-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Luther, *Enchiridion piarum precationum* (1529) (*Werke* WA X. ii. 394). Cf. sec. 20, note 30, below.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Augsburg Confession, art. vii, where the church is defined as "the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered." Important as discipline is for Calvin, he does not distinctly make it one of the *notae*, or marks, by which the church is recognized, as does Bucer, *Scripta Anglicana*, p. 36. Cf. Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 228. The First Scots Confession, ch. xviii, makes discipline the third "mark," as does the Belgic Confession, art. xxix.



tion 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. In this way we preserve for the universal church its unity, which devilish spirits have always tried to sunder; and we do not defraud of their authority those lawful assemblies which have been set up in accordance with local needs.

*(A church with these marks, however defective, is not to be forsaken: the sin of schism, 10-16)*

#### 10. Marks and authority of the church

<sup>b</sup>We have laid down as distinguishing marks of the church the preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments.<sup>19</sup> 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. However it may be, where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time being no deceitful or ambiguous form of the church is seen; and no one is permitted to spurn its authority, flout its warnings, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements—much less to desert it and break its unity. For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished.

<sup>c</sup>It is of no small importance that it is called "the pillar and ground of the truth" and "the house of God" [I Tim. 3:15, KJV]. By these words Paul means that the church is the faithful keeper of God's truth in order that it may not perish in the world. For by its ministry and labor God willed to have the preaching of his Word kept pure and to show himself the Father of a family, while he feeds us with spiritual food and provides everything that makes for our salvation. It is also no common praise to say that Christ has chosen and set apart the church as his bride, "without spot or wrinkle" [Eph. 5:27], "his body and . . . fullness" [Eph. 1:23]. From this it follows that separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ. Hence, we must even more avoid so

<sup>19</sup> Sec. 9, above. Note the important phrase presently added: "where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard." Cf. Calvin's *Articles of the Faculty of Paris with the Antidote*, art. xviii (CR VII. 29, 31: "*ubi verbum eius auditur*"; tr. Calvin, *Tracts* I. 103). See also Comm. John 5:24: "Now he affirms that life is obtained by hearing his word, and by the word 'hearing' he means faith. . . . But faith has its seat not in the ears but in the heart."

wicked a separation. For when with all our might we are attempting the overthrow of God's truth, we deserve to have him hurl the whole thunderbolt of his wrath to crush us. Nor can any more atrocious crime be conceived than for us by sacrilegious disloyalty to violate the marriage that the only-begotten Son of God deigned to contract with us. [Cf. Eph. 5:23-32.]

#### 11. The inviolable validity of the marks

<sup>b</sup>Let us therefore carefully keep these marks imprinted upon our minds and esteem them in accordance with the Lord's will. For there is nothing that Satan plots more than to remove and do away with one or both of these. Sometimes he tries by effacing and destroying these marks to remove the true and genuine distinction of the church. Sometimes he tries by heaping contempt upon them to drag us away from the church in open rebellion. By his craft the pure preaching of the Word has in some ages disappeared; and now with the same malice he is striving to overthrow the ministry, a ministry Christ so ordained in the church that, if destroyed, the upbuilding of the church would fail [Eph. 4:12]. But how dangerous—nay, how deadly—a temptation is it, when one is prompted to withdraw from that congregation wherein are seen the signs and tokens with which the Lord thought his church sufficiently marked? We see what great heed we are to take on either hand. For, in order that the title "church" may not deceive us, every congregation that claims the name "church" must be tested by this standard as by a touchstone.<sup>20</sup> If in Word and sacraments it has the order approved by the Lord, it will not deceive; let us, then, confidently pay to it the honor due to churches. But again, if, devoid of Word and sacraments, it advertises the name of church, we must just as scrupulously beware such deceits, as we must avoid rashness and pride on the other side.

#### 12. Heeding the marks guards against capricious separation

<sup>b</sup>The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.

What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true

<sup>20</sup> "*Ad Lydium lapidem.*" The Lydian stone (a velvet-black variety of jasper) was used in testing the purity of gold.

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; our 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 faith. Suppose that one church believes—short of unbridled contention and opinionated stubbornness—that souls upon leaving bodies fly to heaven; while another, not daring to define the place, is convinced nevertheless that they live to the Lord. What churches would disagree on this one point? Here are the apostle's words: "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, be of the same mind; and if you be differently minded in anything, God shall reveal this also to you" [Phil. 3:15]. Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters<sup>21</sup> should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.

But here I would not support even the slightest errors with the thought of fostering them through flattery and connivance. But I say we must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions. For in it alone is kept safe and uncorrupted that doctrine in which piety stands sound and the use of the sacraments ordained by the Lord is guarded. In the meantime, if we try to correct what displeases us, we do so out of duty. Paul's statement applies to this: "If a better revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent" [I Cor. 14:30 p.]. From this 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.<sup>22</sup> That is, we are neither to renounce the communion of the church nor, remaining in it, to disturb its peace and duly ordered discipline.

### 13. Scandal in the church no occasion for leaving it\*

<sup>b</sup>In bearing with imperfections of life we ought to be far more considerate. For here the descent is very slippery and Satan ambushes us with no ordinary devices. For there have always been

<sup>21</sup> Cf. IV. ii. 1. The distinction of fundamental and nonfundamental articles of belief is woven into Calvin's thought, though not definitively treated by him. F. Wendel remarks on the importance of this doctrine in Calvin's championing of church unity, and cites Comm. I Cor. 3:11 (CR XLIX. 1354): "The fundamental doctrine, which it is nowise permissible to break, is that we cleave to Christ, for he is the only foundation [*unique fondament*] of the

those who, imbued with a false conviction of their own perfect sanctity, as if they had already become a sort of airy spirits,<sup>23</sup> spurned association with all men in whom they discern any remnant of human nature. The Cathari of old were of this sort, as well as the Donatists, who approached them in foolishness. Such today are some of the Anabaptists who wish to appear advanced beyond other men.

There are others who sin more out of ill-advised zeal for righteousness than out of that insane pride. When they do not see a quality of life corresponding to the doctrine of the gospel among those to whom it is announced, they immediately judge that no church exists in that place.<sup>24</sup> This is a very legitimate complaint, and we give all too much occasion for it in this most miserable age. And our cursed sloth is not to be excused, for the Lord will not allow it to go unpunished, seeing that he has already begun to chastise it with heavy stripes. Woe to us, then, who act with such dissolute and criminal license that weak consciences are wounded because of us! But on their part those of whom we have spoken sin in that they do not know how to restrain their disfavor. For where the Lord requires kindness, they neglect it and give themselves over completely to immoderate severity. Indeed, because they think no church exists where there are not perfect purity and integrity of life, they depart out of hatred of wickedness from the lawful church, while they fancy themselves turning aside from the faction of the wicked.

They claim that the church of Christ is holy [Eph. 5:26]. <sup>c</sup>But in order that they may know that the church is at the same time mingled of good men and bad, let them hear the parable from

church." The doctrines here named are introduced by the word *qualia* (such as) and are of course not a full enumeration of those which Calvin would hold requisite. The notion of fundamental articles formed the core of various liberal projects of union in the seventeenth century when it was advanced by Georg Calixtus, Pierre Jurieu, Samuel Werenfels, J. A. Turretin, and others. See Rouse and Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, pp. 79 ff., 92 f., 107, 111.

<sup>22</sup> On I Cor. 14:29–33, 40, Reformed and Puritan churches have rested their principle of participation by the members in Scriptural discussions as an expression of the priesthood of all Christians. (Calvin has inserted "better" in verse 30.) Cf. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, pp. 301, 318 f.; Pannier, *Institution* II. 133, note a, p. 386.

<sup>23</sup> "*Aerii daemones*." VG: "*Anges de Paradis*," "Angels of Paradise." Cf. Luther's phrase "the heavenly prophets" (1525), ridiculing the fanaticism of Carlstadt and Müntzer.

<sup>24</sup> By "Cathari" Calvin evidently refers to the Novatianists (ca. 250), who were often called Cathari, rather than the Albigensians (ca. 1200). Cf. sec. 23, below. VG explains "*Cathares*" by the phrase, "that is, the pure ones." Though especially directed against the Anabaptists, this section is a vigorous rebuke to the sectarian claim of superiority, in all its forms. The Anabaptist denial



Christ's lips that compares the church to a net <sup>b</sup>in which all kinds of fish are gathered and are not sorted until laid out on the shore [Matt. 13:47-58]. Let them hear that it is like a field sown with good seed which is through the enemy's deceit scattered with tares and is not purged of them until the harvest is brought into the threshing floor [Matt. 13:24-30]. <sup>c</sup>Let them hear finally that it is like a threshing floor on which grain is so collected that it lies hidden under the chaff until, winnowed by fan and sieve, it is at last stored in the granary [Matt. 3:12]. <sup>d</sup>But if the Lord declares that the church is to labor under this evil—to be weighed down with the mixture of the wicked—until the Day of Judgment, they are vainly seeking a church besmirched with no blemish.

#### 14. Paul and the needs of his congregations

<sup>b</sup>But, they cry out, it is intolerable that a plague of vices rages far and wide. Suppose the apostle's opinion here again answers them. Among the Corinthians no slight number had gone astray; in fact, almost the whole body was infected. There was not one kind of sin only, but very many; and they were no light errors but frightful misdeeds; there was corruption not only of morals but of doctrine. What does the holy apostle—the instrument of the Heavenly Spirit, by whose testimony the church stands or falls—do about this? Does he seek to separate himself from such? Does he cast them out of Christ's Kingdom? Does he fell them with the ultimate thunderbolt of anathema? He not only does nothing of the sort; he even recognizes and proclaims them to be the church of Christ and the communion of saints [I Cor. 1:2]! Among the Corinthians quarrels, divisions, and jealousies flare [I Cor. 1:11; 3:3; 5:1; 6:7; 9:1 ff.]; disputes and altercations burgeon together with greed; an evil deed is openly approved which even pagans would detest [I Cor. 5:1]; the name of Paul (whom they ought to have honored as a father) is insolently defamed; some mock the resurrection of the dead, to the destruction of the whole gospel as well [I Cor. 15:12]; God's free gifts serve ambition, not love [cf. I Cor. 13:5]; and many things are done without decency

that a church exists if it is not completely pure is illustrated in the *Acts of the Conference Between Preachers and Baptist Brethren in Bern* (1538) (*Acta des Gesprächs zwischen predicanen und Teuffbruederen inn der Stadt Bern*, Staatsarchiv Bern, "Unnütze Papiere," t. 80) (film copy in Goshen College Library). Cf. Zwingli, *Opera*, ed. Schuler and Schulthess, III, 390; Jackson, *Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, pp. 180 f. On the defective but advancing holiness of the church, see H. Quistorp, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things*, pp. 27-35. In secs. 13-16 here Calvin rejects various positions of the Swiss Anabaptists. In sec. 17 he turns from the discussion of the holiness of the church in general to the personal holiness of its members.

or order. Yet the church abides among them because the ministry of Word and sacraments remains unrepudiated there. Who, then, would dare snatch the title "church" from these who cannot be charged with even a tenth part of such misdeeds? What, I ask, would those who rage with such churlishness against present-day churches have done with the Galatians, all but deserters of the gospel, among whom this same apostle still recognized churches [Gal. 1:2]?

#### 15. Fellowship with wicked persons

<sup>c</sup>They also object that Paul severely rebuked the Corinthians for tolerating an infamous man in their fellowship [I Cor. 5:2]. Then he lays down a general principle wherein he declares it wrong even to eat bread with a man of shameful life [I Cor. 5:11]. Here they exclaim, "If it is not permitted to eat ordinary bread, how is it permitted to eat the Lord's bread?"

I confess it a great disgrace if pigs and dogs have a place among the children of God, and a still greater disgrace if the sacred body of Christ be prostituted to them. <sup>d</sup>And indeed, if churches are well ordered, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom. <sup>e</sup>Nor will they indiscriminately admit worthy and unworthy together to that sacred banquet. But because pastors are not always zealously on the watch, and are also sometimes more lenient than they should be, or are hindered from being able to exercise the severity they would like, the result is that even the openly wicked are not always removed from the company of the saints. This I admit to be a fault and I do not intend to excuse it, since Paul sharply rebukes it in the Corinthians. But even if the church be slack in its duty, still each and every individual has not the right at once to take upon himself the decision to separate. Indeed, I do not deny that it is the godly man's duty to abstain from all familiarity with the wicked, and not to enmesh himself with them in any voluntary relationship. But it is one thing to flee the boon companionship of the wicked; another, in hating them, to renounce the communion of the church.

But in thinking it a sacrilege to partake of the Lord's bread with the wicked, they are much more rigid than Paul. For when Paul urges us to a holy and pure partaking of it, he does not require that one examine another, or every one the whole church, but that each individual prove himself [I Cor. 11:28]. If it were unlawful to partake of communion with an unworthy person, surely Paul would bid us investigate whether there is anyone in the multitude whose uncleanness pollutes us. But when he requires each one to prove himself alone, he shows that we are not



at all harmed if anyone unworthy foists himself upon us. What follows agrees with this: "He who eats unworthily eats and drinks judgment upon himself" [I Cor. 11:29]. Paul does not say "upon others," but "upon himself." And justly. For individuals ought not to have the authority to determine who are to be received and who are to be rejected. This cognizance belongs to the church as a whole and cannot be exercised without lawful order, as will be stated more fully below. It will therefore be wicked for any individual to be soiled with another's unworthiness, whom he cannot and ought not to bar from access.

16. *The false claim of perfection comes from distorted opinion*

But though this temptation sometimes springs up even among good men from ill-advised zeal for righteousness, we shall perceive that this overscrupulousness<sup>25</sup> is born rather of pride and arrogance and false opinion of holiness than of true holiness and true zeal for it. Therefore, those who more boldly than others incite defection from the church, and are like standard-bearers, have for the most part no other reason than by their contempt of all to show they are better than the others. Augustine, then, speaks wisely and well: "The godly manner and measure of church discipline ought at all times to be concerned with 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' [Eph. 4:3]. This precept of mutual forbearance the apostle ordered to be kept. When it is unkept, punishment as a remedy proves not only superfluous but even dangerous, and on that account no remedy at all. Not because of their hatred of others' iniquities but because of hankering after their own contentions, these sons of evil strive to drag along or at least to divide all the weak common folk who are entangled in boasting of their own name. Puffed up with pride, mad with obstinacy, deceitful in their slanders, troublesome in their seditions, these evil persons feign a rigid severity so they cannot be shown to lack the light of truth. Holy Scripture bids us correct our brothers' vices with more moderate care, while preserving sincerity of love and unity of peace. This principle they prostitute to the sacrilege of schism and the occasion for cutting off the brethren from the fellowship." But to godly and peaceable men Augustine gives this advice: "Mercifully to correct what they can; patiently to bear and lovingly to bewail and mourn what they cannot; until God either amends or corrects or in the harvest uproots the tares and winnows the chaff" [Matt. 13:40; 3:12; Luke 3:17].<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "*Morositatem.*" Cf. I. xiii. 3, note 9, and sec. 20, below, "surliness."

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Against the Letter of Parmenianus* III. i. 1; III. ii. 15 (MPL 43. 81 ff., 94; CSEL 51. 98, 118). W. E. Keeney has examined various aspects of Anabaptist perfectionism in his dissertation, *The Development of Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice, 1539-1564*. See esp. pp. 178-185.

<sup>b</sup>Let all godly men strive to equip themselves with this armor, lest, while they seem strenuous and courageous vindicators of righteousness, they depart from the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the only kingdom of righteousness. For because God willed that the communion of his church be maintained in this outward society, he who out of hatred of the wicked breaks the token of that society treads a path that slopes to a fall from the communion of saints.

Let them ponder that in a great multitude there are many men, truly holy and innocent in the Lord's sight, who escape their notice. Let them ponder that even among those who seem diseased there are many who in no wise are pleased with, or flatter themselves in, their faults, but aroused again and again by a profound fear of the Lord, aspire to a more upright life. Let them ponder that a man is not to be judged for one deed, inasmuch as the holiest sometimes undergo a most grievous fall. Let them ponder how much more important both the ministry of the Word and participation in the sacred mysteries are for the gathering of the church than the possibility that this whole power may be dissipated through the guilt of certain ungodly men. Finally, let them realize that in estimating the true church divine judgment is of more weight than human.

*(The imperfect holiness of the church does not justify schism, but affords occasion for the exercise within it of the forgiveness of sins, 17-22)*

17. *The holiness of the church*

<sup>e(a)</sup>Because they also allege that the church is not without basis called holy, <sup>b</sup>it is fitting to examine in what holiness it excels lest, if we are not willing to admit a church unless it be perfect in every respect, we leave no church at all. True, indeed, is Paul's statement: "Christ . . . gave himself up for the church that he might sanctify her; he cleansed her by the washing of water in the word of life, that he might present her to himself as his glorious bride, without spot or wrinkle," etc. [Eph. 5:25-27 p.]. Yet it also is no less true that the Lord is daily at work in smoothing out wrinkles and cleansing spots. From this it follows that the church's holiness is not yet complete. The church is holy, then, in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect: it makes progress from day to day but has not yet reached its goal of holiness, as will be explained more fully elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. sec. 13, above. The future tense is carried over from the 1539 edition, in ch. iv, of which the material of the present sec. 13 follows this passage (CR I. 540, 546). Consult Pannier, *Institution* II. 123, 133.

The prophets prophesy that there will be a holy Jerusalem through which "strangers shall never pass" [Joel 3:17], and a most holy temple wherein the unclean shall not enter [Isa. 35:8; cf. ch. 52:1]. Let us not understand this prophecy as if all the members of the church were without blemish; but because they zealously aspire to holiness and perfect purity, the cleanness that they have not yet fully attained is granted them by God's kindness. And although there are oftentimes few evidences of this sort of sanctification among men, <sup>b(a)</sup>still we must hold that from the creation of the world there was no time when the Lord did not have his church; and even until the consummation of the age, there will be no time when he will not have it. <sup>a</sup>For even though the whole human race has from the very beginning been corrupted and vitiated by Adam's sin, from this polluted mass, as it were, He ever sanctifies certain vessels unto honor [cf. Rom. 9:23 ff.] that there may be no age that does not experience his mercy. <sup>b</sup>This he has attested by sure promises such as these: "I have made a covenant with my chosen ones, I have sworn to David my servant: 'I will perpetuate your seed forever and build your throne for all generations'" [Ps. 89:3-4 p.]. Also: "The Lord has chosen Zion; he has chosen it for his habitation; this is my resting place forever," etc. [Ps. 132:13-14]. Also: "Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and . . . the moon and stars for light by night. . . . If these laws fail before me, . . . then shall the seed of Israel fail" [Jer. 31:35-36 p.].

#### 18. *The example of the prophets*

Christ himself, the apostles, and almost all the prophets have furnished us examples of this. Fearful are those descriptions with which Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Habakkuk, and others bewail the afflictions of the Jerusalem church. In people, in magistracy, and in priesthood all things had been so far corrupted that <sup>c</sup>Isaiah does not hesitate to liken Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah [Isa. 1:10]. <sup>c</sup>Religion was in part despised, in part besmirched. In morals one frequently notes theft, robbery, treachery, slaughter, and like evil deeds. Still the prophets did not because of this establish new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which to perform separate sacrifices. But whatever men were like, because the prophets considered that the Lord had set his word among them and had instituted rites wherewith he was worshiped there, they stretched out clean hands to him in the midst of the assembly of the wicked. Surely, if they had thought they would become contaminated from these rites, they would have died a hundred times rather than allow themselves to be dragged thither. Nothing, con-

sequently, kept them from creating a schism save their zeal to maintain unity. But if the holy prophets had scruples against separating themselves from the church because of many great misdeeds, not of one man or another but of almost all the people, we claim too much for ourselves if we dare withdraw at once from the communion of the church just because the morals of all do not meet our standard or even square with the profession of Christian faith.

#### 19. *The example of Christ and of the apostles*

Now what was the world like in the time of Christ and the apostles? Even then the desperate impiety of the Pharisees and the dissolute life which commonly prevailed could not prevent them from practicing the same rites along with the people, and from assembling in one temple with the rest for public exercises of religion. How did this happen, except that those who participated in these same rites with a clean conscience knew that they were not at all contaminated by association with the wicked?

If anyone is not convinced by prophets and apostles, let him at least yield to Christ's authority. Cyprian, then, has put it well: "Even though there seem to be tares or unclean vessels in the church, there is no reason why we ourselves should withdraw from the church; rather, we must toil to become wheat; we must strive as much as we can to be vessels of gold and silver. But the breaking of earthen vessels belongs solely to the Lord, to whom has also been entrusted an iron rod [Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27]. And let no one so claim for himself what is the Son's alone, that it is enough to winnow the chaff and thresh the straw [cf. Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17] and by human judgment to separate out all the tares [cf. Matt. 13:38-41]. Proud, indeed, is this stubbornness and impious presumption, which wicked madness takes upon itself," etc.<sup>28</sup>

Let the following two points, then, stand firm. First, he who voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the church (where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered) is without excuse. Secondly, neither the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons.

#### 20. *Forgiveness of sins and the church*

Their surliness and arrogance go even farther: for they do not

<sup>28</sup> Cyprian, *Letters* liv. 3 (CSEL 3. ii. 622 f.; tr. ANF V. 327).



recognize the church unless it be free of even the slightest blemish.<sup>29</sup> In fact, they are angry against upright teachers because these, by urging believers to improvement, teach them to groan throughout life under a burden of vices and to take refuge in pardon. Our adversaries object that by this means people are led away from perfection.

I admit that in urging men to perfection we must not toil slowly or listlessly, much less give up. However, I say it is a devilish invention for our minds, while as yet we are in the earthly race, to be cocksure about our perfection. Thus in the Creed <sup>b(a)</sup>forgiveness of sins appropriately follows mention of the church. For, as one reads in the prophet, only the citizenry and household of the church obtain this [Isa. 33:14-24]. Therefore, the building of the heavenly Jerusalem ought to come first, and in it the kindness of God should then have a place in order that the iniquity of all who come to it may be blotted out. Now I say that it ought first to be built up, not that there can be any church without forgiveness of sins, but because the Lord has promised his mercy solely in the communion of saints.<sup>30</sup> Forgiveness of sins, then, is for us the first entry into the church and Kingdom of God. Without it, there is for us no covenant or bond with God. <sup>b</sup>For thus he speaks through the prophet: "In that day I will make for you a covenant with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and the reptiles of the ground. I will break the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make men lie down without fear. I will betroth you to me forever. I will (I say) betroth you to me in righteousness and in judgment, in mercy and in compassion" [Hos. 2:18-19, cf. Vg.]. We see how the Lord reconciles us to himself through his mercy. So also elsewhere, when he proclaims that the people whom he scattered in his wrath are to be gathered together again, he says, "I will cleanse them from all the iniquity with which they have sinned against me" [Jer. 33:8, cf. Vg.]. Accordingly, we are initiated into the society of the church by the sign of baptism, which teaches us that entrance into God's family is not open to us unless we first are cleansed of our filth by his goodness.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Acts of the Conference*, Staatsarchiv Bern, "Unnütze Papiere," t. 80, fo. 87 f.

<sup>30</sup> The absurdity of demanding absolute holiness as a condition of participation is evident from the fact that forgiveness of sins is a perpetual activity within the church in its aspect as the communion of saints, and does not take place apart from that communion. *Eine kurze Form . . . des Glaubens* (1520) (*Werke* WA VII. 219; tr. *Works of Martin Luther* II. 373): "I believe that in this congregation, and nowhere else, there is forgiveness of sins." Cf. *Enchiridion piarum precatum* (*Werke* WA-X. ii. 394).

## 21. Lasting forgiveness for the members of the church!

<sup>b</sup>Not only does the Lord through forgiveness of sins receive and adopt us once for all into the church, but through the same means he preserves and protects us there. For what would be the point of providing a pardon for us that was destined to be of no use? Every godly man is his own witness that the Lord's mercy, if it were granted only once, would be void and illusory, since each is quite aware throughout his life of the many infirmities that need God's mercy. And clearly not in vain does God promise this grace especially to those of his own household; not in vain does he order the same message of reconciliation daily to be brought to them.<sup>30x</sup> <sup>b</sup>So, carrying, as we do, the traces of sin around with us throughout life, unless we are sustained by the Lord's constant grace in forgiving our sins, we shall scarcely abide one moment in the church. But the Lord has called his children to eternal salvation. Therefore, they ought to ponder that there is pardon ever ready for their sins. <sup>b(a)</sup>Consequently, we must firmly believe that by God's generosity, mediated by Christ's merit, through the sanctification of the Spirit, sins have been and are daily pardoned to us who have been received and engrafted into the body of the church.

## 22. The power of the keys

<sup>c</sup>To impart to us this benefit, the keys of the church have been given. When Christ gave the command to the apostles and conferred upon them the power to forgive sins [Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23], he did not so much desire that the apostles absolve from sins those who might be converted from ungodliness to the faith of Christ, as that they should perpetually discharge this office among believers. Paul teaches this when he writes that the mission of reconciliation has been entrusted to the ministers of the church and that by it they are repeatedly to exhort the people to be reconciled to God in Christ's name [II Cor. 5:18, 20]. Therefore, in the communion of 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. For very many, on account of their weakness, need personal consolation. And Paul mentions that not only in public preaching, but from house to house as well, he has attested his faith in Christ, and has individually admonished each man concerning the doctrine of salvation [Acts 20:20-21].

We should accordingly note three things here. First, however <sup>30x</sup> "And clearly . . . brought to them." (Addition of 1553.)



great the holiness in which God's children excel, they still—so long as they dwell in mortal bodies—remain unable to stand before God without forgiveness of sins. Secondly, this benefit so belongs to the church that we cannot enjoy it unless we abide in communion with the church. Thirdly, it is dispensed to us through the ministers and pastors of the church, either by the preaching of the gospel or by the administration of the sacraments; and herein chiefly stands out the power of the keys, which the Lord has conferred upon the society of believers. Accordingly, let each one of us count it his own duty to seek forgiveness of sins only where the Lord has placed it. Public reconciliation, which has to do with discipline, will be discussed in its place.<sup>31</sup>

*(Incidents illustrating forgiveness within the community of believers, 23–29)*

23. *All believers are to seek forgiveness of their sins*

<sup>b</sup>But since those delirious spirits of whom I have spoken are trying to snatch away from the church the sole anchor of salvation, we must fortify our consciences more strongly against such a pestilential opinion. Once the Novatianists stirred up the churches with this teaching,<sup>32</sup> but our own age has certain Anabaptists (not very different from the Novatianists) who are lapsing into the same madness. For they feign that in baptism God's people are reborn into a pure and angelic life, unsullied by any carnal filth. But if after baptism anyone falls away, they leave him nothing but God's inexorable judgment. In short, to the sinner who has lapsed after he has received grace they hold out no hope of pardon. For they recognize no other forgiveness of sins than that by which they were first reborn.<sup>33</sup>

Although no falsehood is more clearly refuted by Scripture, because these fellows find persons on whom to impose it (just as once Novatus had very many followers), let us briefly show how madly intent they are upon their own and others' destruction.

First, since at the Lord's command the saints daily repeat this prayer, "Forgive us our debts" [Matt. 6:12], they doubtless confess themselves debtors. And their petition is not in vain, for the Lord has laid down that they are to seek only what he will give them. Indeed, although the Father attests that he will hear every prayer, this absolution he has sealed with a special promise. What more do we wish? The Lord requires the saints to confess their sins—and that indeed continually throughout life; and he promises

<sup>31</sup> IV. xii. Cf. Pannier, *Institution* II. 146 f.; notes on pp. 388 f.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. sec. 13, note 24, above.

<sup>33</sup> *Acts of the Conference* . . . Staatsarchiv Bern, "Unnütze Papiere," t. 80, fo. 106 ff., 110 ff.; OS V. 26, note 3.

pardon. What boldness is it either to exempt them from sin, or, if they have stumbled, utterly to exclude them from grace? Whom, now, would he have us forgive seventy times seven? Is it not our brethren [Matt. 18:21–22]? For what purpose did he command this except that we should emulate his kindness? He therefore forgives not once or twice, but as often as men, stricken with the awareness of their transgressions, cry out to him.

24. *God's abundant grace to sinful believers under the Old Covenant: the Law\**

<sup>b</sup>To begin with the very swaddling clothes of the church: the patriarchs had been circumcised, chosen to participate in the covenant, doubtless taught righteousness and integrity by their fathers' diligence—when they conspired to murder their brother [Gen. 37:18]. Here was a crime that even the most depraved thieves should have loathed. Softened at last by Judah's advice, they sold him [Gen. 37:28]; but this too was an unbearable cruelty. Simeon and Levi, illicitly avenging [their sister's defilement], an act condemned also by their father's judgment, raged against the Shechemites [Gen. 34:25]. Reuben fouled his father's bed with vilest lust [Gen. 35:22]. Judah, wanting to indulge in fornication, beyond the law of nature goes in to his son's wife [Gen. 38:16]. Yet far from being banished from the chosen people, these men were raised up as heads!

What about David? When he was chief administrator of justice, how wickedly did he open the way for his blind lust by the shedding of innocent blood [II Sam. 11:4, 15]! He had already been reborn, and among the reborn was adorned with the Lord's excellent praises. Still, he committed that crime (horrible even among the Gentiles) and yet received pardon [II Sam. 12:13].

And (not to tarry over individual examples) as often as promises of divine mercy are manifested in the Law and the Prophets toward the Israelites, so often does the Lord prove that he shows himself willing to forgive the offenses of his people! For what does Moses promise will take place when the people fallen into apostasy shall return to the Lord? "The Lord will lead you back from captivity, and will take pity on you, and will gather you from the people among whom you are scattered. If you were scattered to the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I shall gather you." [Deut. 30:3–4, cf. Vg.]

25. *God's abundant grace to sinful believers under the Old Covenant: the Prophets†*

<sup>b</sup>But I do not want to begin a never-ending enumeration. For

the prophets are full of promises of this kind, which offer mercy to a people though they be covered with infinite crimes. What graver iniquity is there than rebellion? For it is called divorce between God and the church; yet it is outstripped by God's goodness. "What man is there" (he says through Jeremiah) "who, if his wife prostitute her body to adulterers, can bear to return to her embrace? By your fornications all your ways are polluted, O Judah; the earth has been filled with your filthy loves. Return yet to me and I will receive you" [Jer. 3:1 p., cf. Vg.]. "Return, you who turn away, I shall not avert my face from you, for I am holy, and I will not be angry forever" [Jer. 3:12, Vg.]. Surely, there can be no other feeling in him who affirms that he does not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live [Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11]. Accordingly, when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he intended it also to be used so that thereby the prayers offered to obtain pardon of sins might be answered. "If thy children," he said, "sin against thee—for there is no man who does not sin—and thou in anger deliverest them to their enemies . . . and they repent in their hearts . . . and turn again and make supplication unto thee in their captivity, saying, 'We have sinned and acted perversely,' and pray to thee toward their land, which thou gavest to their fathers, . . . and toward this holy Temple, . . . thou wilt hear their prayers . . . in heaven . . . and be appeased unto thy people who have sinned against thee, and all their transgressions that they have committed against thee" [I Kings 8:46–50 p., cf. Vg.]. And not in vain has the Lord ordained in the law daily sacrifices for sins [Num. 28:3 ff.]. For if the Lord had not foreseen that his people would be continually burdened with diseases of sins, he would never have established this remedy.

26. *God's abundant grace to sinful believers under the New Covenant*<sup>t</sup>

<sup>t</sup>Has this benefit been so taken away from believers by Christ's coming, in which the fullness of grace was revealed, in order that they dare not pray for pardon of sins and, if they have offended the Lord, that they may obtain no mercy? What else will this be but to say that Christ has come for the destruction, not the salvation, of his people, if God's kindness, which in the Old Testament had been unfailingly ready for the saints for the forgiveness of sins, is now said to be completely taken away? But if we have faith in the Scriptures—which expressly proclaim that in Christ the grace and gentleness of the Lord have fully appeared, the riches of his mercy have been poured out [Titus 1:9; 3:4; II Tim. 1:9], and the reconciliation of God and men fulfilled [II Cor. 5:18 ff.]—let us

not doubt that the Heavenly Father's clemency flows forth to us much more abundantly, rather than that it is cut off or curtailed.

And proofs of this are not lacking. Peter, who had heard that anyone not confessing Christ's name among men would be denied in the presence of the angels of God [Matt. 10:33; Mark 8:38], denied him thrice one night and not without cursing [Matt. 26:74]; yet he was not deprived of pardon [Luke 22:32; John 21:15 ff.]. Those who lived disorderly among the Thessalonians are chastised in such a way as to be invited to repentance [cf. II Thess. 3:14–15; also ch. 3:6]. Not even Simon the Magician is cast into despair, but is rather bidden to have good hope, when Peter urges him to take refuge in prayer [Acts 8:22].

27. *God's abundant grace toward delinquent churches*<sup>t</sup>

<sup>t</sup>What of the fact that, while the most heinous sins have sometimes possessed entire churches, Paul has nevertheless gently freed them from these, rather than cursed their leaders? The defection of the Galatians was no slight transgression [Gal. 1:6; 3:1; 4:9]. The Corinthians were less excusable than they, for they abounded in more and not less heinous misdeeds. Still, neither were barred from the Lord's mercy. Indeed, the very ones who, in uncleanness, fornication, and licentiousness, had sinned more than the others are expressly invited to repentance [II Cor. 12:21]. For the Lord's covenant remains, and shall remain forever inviolable, which he solemnly ratified with Christ, the true Solomon, and his members in these words: "If his children forsake my law and walk not in my judgments, if they profane my righteousnesses . . . and keep not my commandments, . . . I will visit their transgressions with the rod, their iniquities with stripes. But my mercy will I not utterly take from him" [Ps. 89:30–33, RV, cf. Vg.]. Finally, by the very order<sup>34</sup> of the Creed we are taught that continual grace for sins remains in Christ's church. For once the church has, so to speak, been established, forgiveness of sins is added to it.

28. *Are only unconscious sins forgivable?*

<sup>t</sup>Certain men, somewhat more prudent, when they see the teachings of Novatus refuted by the great clarity of Scripture, do not deem every sin unpardonable, but only voluntary transgression of the law, into which one knowingly and willingly falls.<sup>35</sup> Now those who speak thus allow pardon for no sin, except one that is

<sup>34</sup> "Dispositione," i.e., the order of the clauses in the Apostles' Creed.

<sup>35</sup> Referring to the Anabaptist opinion stated in article ii of the Confession, in seven articles, adopted February 24, 1527, at Schleithem near Schaffhausen. See translation from the German text by J. C. Wenger, *Mennonite Quarterly*



an error of ignorance. But in the law the Lord commanded one sort of sacrifice to be offered to atone for the voluntary sins of believers [Lev. 6:1 ff.], another sort to redeem their acts of ignorance [Lev., ch. 4]. Consequently, what depravity it is not to grant any expiation for voluntary sin! I say that nothing is more apparent than that Christ's sacrifice is alone sufficient to forgive the voluntary sins of the saints inasmuch as the Lord has attested this by carnal sacrifices as seals.

Again, who can excuse David on grounds of ignorance when he clearly was so well versed in the law? Did not David, who daily punished adultery and murder in his subjects, know what great crimes they were [II Sam., ch. 11]? Did murder of a brother seem a lawful thing to the patriarchs [Gen. 37:18 ff.]? Had the Corinthians profited so ill as to think lust, impurity, fornication, hatreds, and contentions pleasing to God [I Cor., ch. 5]? Did Peter, so carefully warned, not know what an enormity it was to renounce his Master [Matt. 26:74]? Therefore, let us not by our unkindness bar the way to God's mercy, which manifests itself so generously.

#### 29. The question of "second repentance" in the ancient church

<sup>b</sup>Indeed, I am aware that the ancient writers interpreted the sins which are daily remitted to believers as rather slight errors, creeping in from weakness of the flesh; the solemn penitence then exacted for more heinous crimes, it seemed to them, should no more be repeated than baptism.<sup>36</sup> We must not interpret this opinion to mean that they wished either to cast into despair those who have fallen away from their first repentance, or to make light those other errors as if they were small in God's sight. For the church fathers well knew that the saints often totter in unbelief, sometimes give vent to superfluous oaths, now and then flare into anger, indeed, even break out into open railing, and besides are troubled with other ills that the Lord thoroughly abominates. But these writers called them "slight errors" in order to distinguish them from public crimes, which with great scandal

*Review XIX* (1945), 243-256. Calvin used a French version (*ibid.*, p. 243). The Latin text by Zwingle of these articles (*Opera*, ed. Schuler and Schulthess, III, 388-413) has been translated by W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 3-9. Cf. III. iii. 21, note 42; IV. xvi. 1, note 2; IV. xx. 2, note 7.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* I. xiii. 27; xiv. 28 (MPL 44, 563 f.; tr. NPNF V, 385 f.); Clement of Alexandria (arguing that frequent repentance is only the semblance of repentance), *Stromata* II. xiii. 57 (GCS 15, 143; MPG 8, 995-998; tr. ANF II, 360 f.); Tertullian, *On Repentance* vii, ix (CCL Tertullianus I, 332 ff., 336; tr. ANF III, 662 f., 664, and Elucidation ii. p. 669).

came under the church's cognizance. Moreover, they made pardon very difficult for those who had committed anything deserving churchly correction. This they did, not because they considered pardon for their sins hard to obtain before the Lord; rather, with this severity they intended to deter others from rashly plunging into iniquities that would merit their being cut off from the communion of the church. Albeit the Lord's Word, which here ought to be our sole rule, surely prescribes a greater moderation. For it teaches that disciplinary rigor is not to be pushed so far that that man for whom it ought to be chiefly concerned becomes overwhelmed with sorrow [II Cor. 2:7]. This we have discussed more fully above.<sup>37</sup>

## \*CHAPTER II

### A COMPARISON OF THE FALSE AND THE TRUE CHURCH

(Departure from true doctrine and worship invalidates the Roman Church's claim to be the true church, 1-6)

#### 1. The basic distinction

<sup>b</sup>It has already been explained how much we ought to value the ministry of the Word and sacraments, and how far our reverence for it should go, that it may be to us a perpetual token by which to distinguish the church.<sup>1</sup> That is, wherever the ministry remains whole and uncorrupted, no moral faults or diseases prevent it from bearing the name "church." Secondly, it is not so weakened by trivial errors as not to be esteemed lawful. We have, moreover, shown that the errors which ought to be pardoned are those which do not harm the chief doctrine of religion,<sup>2</sup> which do not destroy the articles of religion on which all believers ought to agree; and with regard to the sacraments, those which do not abolish or throw down the lawful institution of the Author. But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows—just as a man's life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded. And that is clearly evident from Paul's words when he teaches that the church is founded upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself the chief cornerstone [Eph. 2:20]. If the foundation of the church is the teaching of the prophets and apostles, which bids believers entrust their salvation

<sup>37</sup> Secs. 23 to 29 first appeared in the 1539 edition, where the reference "*supra*" was appropriate. Cautions against severity in discipline are in IV. xii. 8-11.

<sup>1</sup> IV. i. 9-12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. IV. i. 12, note 21.