Classification is necessary in modern life, in spite of the many misunderstandings which may result from it. The word "Calvinism" would appear to be such a necessary classification, in spite of the fact that it can so easily be used to indicate a concern for something less than the whole church. We must somehow indicate the area of the church with which we are dealing in this article, and "Calvinism" probably does as well as any other word.

Nevertheless, in using the word, we must clearly recognize that we have already departed from the teaching, spirit, and intention of Calvin himself. Calvin, who requested that no tombstone be placed upon his grave, did not desire that one or another denomination should be a tombstone raised in his honor. We may be thankful that his wishes have in general been recognized, and that churches living in the traditions of his teachings have not called themselves by his name. The words "reformed" and "presbyterian" are much truer to the spirit of Calvin than is the word "Calvinism." Thus, if one would wish to translate the title of this article into words closer to the spirit of Calvin, it would perhaps be better to speak of "The Church, reformed and presbyterian in government."

Any discussion of Calvin's concept of church government must include at least three factors: (a) the church as that institution of God which lives between the ascension and the second coming; (b) the ministry of the church as being called by God; and (c) the work of the Holy Spirit, who causes all things to be done decently and in order. In more technical terminology, one could call these the eschatological, predestinarian, and ecclesiastical aspects of the church. Because this article is to deal with "Calvinism," it is not our intention to limit the discussion to Calvin, but rather to investigate briefly the significance of Calvin's concepts for the church which has attempted to work out these principles in the governing of the church.

A.

The church lives between the ascension and the second coming of Jesus Christ. In other words, because it cannot be severed from Christ its head, it already is perfected, saved, and even glorified. As the body of Christ on earth, however, it lies in the midst of sin, knows the temptations
of Satan, falls into wickedness, and lives in a state of humiliation and weakness. It is this state of tension which belongs to the essence of the church in these last days that has helped Calvin’s distinction between the visible and invisible church to gain such popularity. For Calvin, those who were members of the invisible church were the elect saints who were connected with each other in Christ. As such, they could neither be severed from him nor could their communion be finally broken. The visible church was the church of the office bearers, preaching, sacraments, and discipline. Calvin fills many pages describing how this church may fall and has fallen, has been led by false shepherds, and denied its Lord. Yet the visible church remained for Calvin the body of Christ. Whereas Calvin did speak in terms of the false church which was led by the anti-Christ, he never equated the visible church with the false church. The visible church is just as fully church as is the invisible. There was but one church for Calvin, and it was both visible and invisible. It is interesting to note that it is precisely the visible church which is called the mother of the faithful.

It is to the credit of the whole Reformed tradition that it has remained so faithful to this eschatological tension in which the church exists upon earth. In days when the church was in decay less careful readers of Scripture tried constantly to undermine the unity of the visible and invisible church. The usual method was to view the visible church as merely an external, human institution in the world, and somehow to remove the invisible church one step from the earth. Thus one finds in the Reformed tradition such distinctions as the internal and external call, the internal and external covenant, the baptism by water and the baptism of the Spirit, and many others. Properly used, such distinctions have their place, but their net result has often been to reduce the eschatological tension by removing the true church from the world.

It may be said that the interest of Calvin and his followers in church order was in a large measure due to this insistence that the church of the ascended Lord exists on earth in the state of humiliation. It was still in the flesh, in all respects like unto the world, yet redeemed and glorified in Christ. Thus the church, in all of its thinking, life and activity, must live with its windows open to heaven from whence comes its help. From this point of view, the church lives out of the future rather than the past. It is living in the hope of his coming. It is not so much that the church goes to meet its Lord as that the Lord comes to the church. Thus no church order can be regarded as final. All church government lives under the approaching judgment of the Lord.

The church in the state of humiliation also partakes of this earthly life, however, and as such must take on form as do other institutions. There is a developing life in the church. Rules are necessary. Constitutions
must be written. Boards and synods meet, discuss, and act. We should not complain about this, for such forms are essential to the being of the church in this age. It is necessary for church constitutions and governments to witness to this eschatological situation.

The eschatological tension in which the church lives accounts for one of the most surprising and paradoxical elements in its history, namely that the church which has for 1900 years maintained that all believers are one is itself the perpetrator of much of the disunity in the world. One may not simply say that the problems of nation, class and race in the church are due to its lack of faithfulness. On the contrary, many such problems arise just because it has been faithful. Because the church in its humiliation has properly insisted upon being a good citizen of the land in which it was placed, it has often been surprised to find itself the champion of nationalism. Because it insisted upon preaching to slaves, it established segregated churches to help a black race escape the dominance of the masters, but now in another age is in a position where it is used by champions of continued segregation. Just because the presbyterian churches have so faithfully lived in the eschatological tension, they more than any other denominations have been faced with problems of national boundaries, different languages and races.

Calvin’s discussion of the visible church, which has as its marks the preaching of the Gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the maintenance of discipline, is of further significance with regard to the relation of the local to the national and international church. In our day it is sometimes felt that the church is basically the international or national organization, and that all local churches partake in the universal church. For Calvin and the Reformed creeds, this is not the case. On the contrary, the whole church is present in the local congregation. When the Word is preached, the sacraments are administered and discipline is maintained, the church is complete. Nothing more can be added. The Reformed Church in America is neither more nor less than is the Reformed Church of Gray Hawk, Kentucky. What more can be done than the preaching of

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1 The Reformed Church in America is presently engaged in a program of revision of the constitution. Since this revision offers some interesting contrasts to the contents of this article, a number of footnotes are being attached to point up these contrasts. It would have been possible to place this material in the body of the article; but since some of the readers may not be familiar with the revision, I have relegated it to the footnotes.

At this point, it is interesting to note that the Reformed Church constitution has “Church” with a capital letter when it refers to the denomination and “church” with a small letter when it refers to a local congregation. Although such a distinction may be helpful for the sake of clarity, one wonders whether it does not tend to minimize the local church. (cf. Art. 1, Sec. 1a; Art. 1, Sec. 4; and Art. 9, Sec. 2b, c, and Sec. 11).

A second problem here is the proper understanding of what the congregation is. Historically, the Reformed position has been that the congregation is bound to
the Word, the observance of the sacraments, and the exercise of the discipline of the Word? Although one judicatory is higher than another in the church of Christ, a synod is no more "church" than is a classis or a consistory. It is the Lord who has revealed himself who from his place in glory gathers his church; the judicatories are his instruments.

B.

Basic to Calvin's thinking with regard to the government of the church was his conviction that the officers must be called. Because there is often much confusion about what it is to be called, it is well to note Calvin's discussion. He distinguished between the external and the secret call, both of which were necessary before a person could take office. The external call is that which comes through some type of election by the church or its members. Calvin goes to great lengths to explain how such election should be made. Particularly noteworthy is his definition of the secret call:

... that secret call of which every minister is conscious to himself before God, but which is not known to the Church. This secret call, however, is the honest testimony of our heart, that we accept the office offered to us, not from ambition or avarice, or any other unlawful motive, but from a sincere fear of God, and an ardent zeal for the edification of the Church (Inst. IV, 3, 11).

This definition of the call is important and striking in that it speaks of the zeal for the proper administration of the ministry of the church, and omits mention of any of the aspects of the mystical experience. Although there is room for the mystical experience of the call in Calvin's thinking, the eschatological tension noted above is also preserved in the doctrine of the call. Coming from the ascended Lord, the call takes place on earth in a very earthly way. Those who stand in an office have not been called to stand above the church and the world. On the contrary, they especially live in the tension of the last days, and manifest in their work both the power of the Spirit and the weakness of the flesh.

Calvin's concept of the call, which influences his whole understanding of the government of the church, places in the church order a strong predestinarian element. All presbyterian church orders are essentially grounded in the predestinating activity of God. It is God who in his

and ministers in a certain geographical area. In the new world, however, a minority position has caused the RCA gradually to accept the concept of a congregation as a body of believers meeting voluntarily together. The constitution through the last revision has come to accept the latter position, by adding the definition of a congregation (Art. 9, Sec. 2a) and changing "within their bounds" to "for them" in Art. 8, Sec. 27a. Four points can be brought against these changes: (1) This concept of the congregation undercut the doctrine of predestination; (2) It brings the relation of church and state into greatest confusion, in that the church is no longer bound to any particular area; (3) Practically, it has been responsible for the loss of many Reformed churches in the "inner city;" (4) This latter concept of the congregation allows Christians to become very easily self-centered in congregational life.
sovereign freedom acts upon and uses his creatures in his service. God could have spoken to men in other ways, without any means or instruments, or by means of angels. In reality, however, God has chosen to use men and the church. The title of Book IV of the *Institutes* also indicates the important role predestination plays in the thought of Calvin with regard to church government. The title is, "On the external means or aids by which God calls us into communion with Christ, and retains us in it." Calvin then sees three such means, namely, the church, the sacraments, and the civil government. In other words, the whole of the discussion in the last book falls under the concept of God's call.

Only when this stress on the call and predestination is maintained can the presbyterian churches uphold their traditional church order. The elder takes a central position, because he has been called to his office. He is not lifted out of this world but remains completely in it. He is a member of the congregation, a grocer or a farmer, has a family, and shares all of the normal problems and concerns of the world. It is remarkable that in recent years all types of experiments are being carried out to bring the message of the Gospel to this world. Priests have entered factories as workers in France; chaplains are being hired by industry; many types of "layman's" clubs are springing up. Yet the central person in this whole endeavor, the elder who works in a factory or store, remains a forgotten man. It is precisely the elder (and also the deacon) who are God's first instruments in translating the Gospel for the world of everyday life.

The history of the church since Calvin indicates the very close relation of the doctrine of predestination to the office of elder. The Lutherans, who have been hesitant about the doctrine of predestination, have also been very hesitant about the office of elder. Congregationalism has very clearly displayed the relationship, in that a weakening of the doctrine of predestination and of the presbyterian form of church order appeared almost simultaneously. On the other hand, it was precisely the Synod of Dordt of 1619 which formulated both the Canons of Dordt and the church order of Dordt. In the opinion of the writer, there is a very close relationship between those two important acts of that Synod.

Thus not only because of the eschatological character of the church but also because of the strong predestinarian background, presbyterian constitutions have an "open" character, which keeps them always ready to hear the call of the Lord and to do his bidding. Not everything is stated or regulated by a constitution. The insistence of the church upon prayer at the opening and closing of all meetings of judicatories, and the possibility of special dispensations indicate the fact that Jesus Christ again and again does things which cannot be foreseen but must be accepted
by the church. The windows of the church in all of its activity are always to be open to the calling, electing, predestinating activity of God.

The fact that Christ is the head of the church and directs her activity combines with the point that the local congregation is as completely church as is the national synod, in such a way as to indicate that outside of Christ himself there can be no final authority in the church. Not only is it true that no one man can fulfill the role of the bishop, but also that no official assembly can take on such a role. There are certain things which a classis or synod can do which cannot be done by a consistory, but the reverse is also true. Thus the higher judicatories may consider appeals, but they cannot initiate disciplinary action with regard to individual members of the congregation. The various assemblies and offices in the church have their spheres of activity and may not intrude upon the office of another. A general synod has certain authority in the church, but it does not rule all things in the national church. It cannot in all matters impress its will upon the classis or a consistory. It is to be regretted that many discussions concerning “centralization” and “decentralization” in the church have actually missed the entire point at stake, in that such discussion usually involves the concept of the location of final authority somewhere within the church on earth, thus either in the synod or classis or consistory or congregation.

The lack of a final authority on earth means that the church must go forward by means of a constant conversation. Synods through their decisions and personnel must discuss with the classes, and classes and consistories must discuss with the synod. Ministers discuss with elders, elders with deacons, and deacons with ministers. The mere holding of the meetings of the various assemblies indicates the necessity of conversation within the church. Differences can be settled not by compromise, but only through the leading of the Holy Spirit, who also leads the church into all truth.

2 The change which gives the classis the power to exercise original supervising power over elders and consistories would seem to confuse the proper relationship of classis to consistory, and make the classis to be a type of “bishop.” In spite of some temporary advantages, this is a dangerous change in the constitution. (See Art. 10, Sec. 2.)

3 The discussion revolving around Art. 12, Sections 18-21, would seem to involve the basic question of final authority. The proposals are based on the conviction that in our day it is necessary to have a “denominational program.” Several questions can be raised: (1) Will the proposed executive council be so powerful an influence that the General Synod itself will discover it to be almost impossible to be a deliberative body? (2) Are there sufficient safeguards protecting the prerogatives of classes and consistories? (3) Does this insistence upon a “denominational program” with the proposed type of organization remain sufficiently open to the leading of the Lord? In my opinion, the need for some type of machinery to meet the present opportunities for the preaching of the Gospel is apparent, but one should be very careful in setting up such machinery, lest we destroy something essential to the proper government of the church. The church often has been tempted to trade something very important for a temporary benefit.
C.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the one holy catholic church is given unity in form and life. Calvin lived in the faith that there was unity not only in the churches, but also in the church universal. Because he saw that the body of Christ could not and must not be divided, Calvin always wrote for the whole church, and when he acted, he acted in relation to the other churches in the world. His writings show that he wrote for the churches of Germany and England as well as for those of France and Switzerland. The divisions in Protestantism grieved him, with the result that he wrote many letters and traveled much in an attempt to reach some type of consensus with the Lutherans and Zwinglians. During the trials of Bolsec about the doctrine of predestination and Servetus concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, Calvin had extensive discussion and correspondence with other churches. Calvin stressed discipline in the church, but he did not exercise a type of discipline which simply meant that someone excluded from one church would be accepted somewhere else. Such discipline has lost its significance. The concept of a number of churches standing next to each other as various denominations was foreign to the mind of Calvin. So far as he was concerned, the Reformation was a unity. The various dogmatic, liturgical, and constitutional differences did not stop Calvin from seeking fellowship with the others.

The fact that the church is one is of tremendous importance in the matter of church government. It simply is not true that each denomination has the right to set up its government in whatever way it desires. The writing of church constitutions is an ecumenical task, even when it is done within the confines of one denomination. A constitution must be so written that it can serve the whole church and not just one small fragment. It is true that every church order must contain rules to cover specific and even rather local situations. Nevertheless, in all essentials, the constitution must be so written that it furthers rather than hinders the unity of the church.

We do not simply write a constitution for the Reformed Church in

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4 No significant change is made in the revision with regard to discipline. It is exceedingly important that the ecumenical aspects of the problem be considered and indicated in the constitution, lest our discipline be either completely neglected or become sectarian in nature. Most of the major American denominations seem to have given up the practice of true discipline in the face of the difficulties involved in a divided church, whereas the Christian Reformed Church appears often to take a sectarian line in allowing extra-biblical positions to become cause for discipline. The whole section on discipline must be rethought in order that the principles of Calvin may be applied in our situation.

5 In changing "the" to "this" Church (Art. 1, sect. 4, 5, 6, 7), the RCA has lost the ecumenical tension of the constitution. This change makes it far too easy for the RCA to escape its responsibilities toward the whole church. Having made this (small?) change, it now becomes possible to make many other revisions without reference to the whole church of Jesus Christ. Such a simple doctrine of the pluriformity of the church has often been attacked in Europe as a bowing to the spirit of modernism.
America, for example. We write a constitution for the Church of Jesus Christ, although it may be that at this moment it is only recognized by the Reformed Church in America.

Calvin's writings show that he believed that the only source for the practice of the church was the Bible. He quotes often from the Bible in his discussions of church government. Nothing may be done in the church which is contrary to the Word of God, and in so far as possible we are to regulate our practice by the works of the Apostles in the New Testament. On the other hand, Calvin recognized that not everything was stated in the New Testament, and saw the possibility that many amendments might be made as new situations arose. He wrote in his commentary on Acts 6:1:

> We learn in this history that the Church cannot be so framed by and by, but that there remain somewhat to be amended; neither can so great a building be finished in one day, that there may not be something added to make the same perfect.

Calvin's followers have recognized the same point, and thus the Reformed synods held in the 16th Century ruled several times that specific texts of Scripture could not be demanded for every point. The sober application of Calvin's thought to the formulation of constitutions is a necessity if the constitutions of presbyterian churches are not to lose their ecumenical nature.

As has become evident by this time, Calvin indicated that the church must have a "fixed form," a "legitimate form" and a "firm policy." The removal of laws conducive to such form would unnerve the church, deface and dissipate it entirely. Calvin laid great emphasis upon Paul's injunction that all things in the church be done decently and in order. While Christ has not prescribed every particular for the church, we must have general rules for the order of the church, which rules may be changed and amended as the needs and interests of the church may require.

At this point it is also of importance to note that in the tradition of Calvin there are also boundaries with regard to church government. The Holy Spirit works not only through the church, but also through the state. The Kingdom of God is broader than the church. Calvin held that there must be separation of church and state, although this did not mean that the one was to be Christian and the other neutral. It is not the duty of

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8The definitions of the church and congregations offered in Art. 9, sect. 2a, b, c are so far from the biblical meanings of the words that in my opinion they go beyond the possibilities of this rule. It is one thing not to require a text for every occasion; it is something quite different to write definitions into the constitution which are contrary to the meaning of the words of Scripture.

9In discussions, I have often noticed that although it is readily admitted that certain changes in the constitution are not in accord with Scripture, the changes are nevertheless defended by saying that this is a legal rather than theological document. This contrast is not valid, for it is far more proper to say that the constitution is an ecclesiastical document having legal and theological ramifications.
the church to take over the affairs of the state, or for the state to rule the
church. Nathan does not rule over David any more than David may tell
Nathan what to preach. The church order must recognize the proper
boundaries with regard to the state and indicate them so that here too
order and decency may prevail. A second boundary for the church order is
the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Thus the constitution cannot
describe faith or piety in their essentials, anymore than it can fully regu­
late the conscience or prayer. It is probably for this reason that the Re­
formed and Presbyterian churches have always carefully distinguished
between the liturgy, the hymnbook, the written confessions, and the con­
nstitution. Each has its own particular role and limits. Because of these limits,
a church order is of necessity brief. Its scope is limited because it concerns
basically only one aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit. There will al­
ways be many things in the Christian life which can not be referred to in
the constitution.

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The eschatological, predestinarian, and ecclesiastical character of Cal­
v'in's thought makes it impossible to speak in terms of a Calvinistic system
of church government. For Calvin and his descendents, there can be but
one church government, and that is the government which comes from the
crucified, risen, and exalted Lord, who rules and forms his church by his
Word and Spirit, and will one day come to meet her.

8Section 55 of the old form of the constitution, stating that only ecclesiastical
matters shall be transacted by ecclesiastical bodies has been dropped. This is un­
fortunate, for coupled with other changes, all indication of the relation of church
and state has disappeared from the constitution. This can only lead to confusion.
Although Section 55 had become somewhat dated historically, it could have been
maintained and continued to do excellent service if more attention had been con­
centrated upon the office of deacon. (Cf. my article, "The Re-discovery of the
Deacon," The Church Herald, March 21, 1958.)