CHAPTER FOUR

CALVIN’S UNDERSTANDING
OF MINISTRY WITHIN THE CHURCH

The previous chapters showed us how Calvin, on a number of occasions, discussed the church’s ministry in the framework of his ecclesiological introduction. Ministry itself is not one of the notae ecclesiae because it is not a distinguishing mark of the true church. But the proclamation of the Word is part of the God-given order through which salvation enters the church. It is one of the instruments used by the Spirit in coming to humankind. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that Calvin discusses ministry before he deals with the sacraments; in doing so he indicates how important ministry is for the functioning of the church, which is a necessity for salvation. The third chapter is dedicated entirely to ministry and received its definitive form in the Latin edition of 1543. This chapter will be read attentively, paragraph by paragraph, so that we can trace and evaluate Calvin’s exact train of thought.

The title of the third chapter is De Ecclesiae doctoribus et ministris, eorum electione et officio, a fascinating and significant title. First of all, two offices are discussed here—that of teacher and that of minister. Who is Calvin referring to? Who in particular are the ministers? Is that, in this instance, a general name for different offices, or is it used to refer to a specific ministry? In combination with ‘doctors,’ the second possibility is the more likely one. Calvin also indicates which elements of their ministry he wants to discuss in particular: their election and their officium. With regard to the first element, we note that he does not want to discuss ordination or vocation in general, but about the election procedure of ministers in the church. With regard to the second element, the officium, this poses a translation problem. The noun officium with its different forms occurs 112 times in book four, and seven of these are in the third chapter.1 The dictionary2 gives three meanings

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1 For this concordant investigation we used the CD-rom Calvin’s Institutes Latin-English Search and Browser Programs, Grand Rapids, 1999.
2 We make use of F. Muller, E.H. Renkema and A.D. Leeman (adaptation), Beknopt Latijns-Nederlands woordenboek (Groningen: Wolters Noordhoff, 198212).
for *officium*: 1) helpfulness, service; 2) service, task, ministry; 3) duty. The second meaning is the most likely one, but it is important not to lose sight of the connotation of the first meaning. To function as a minister implies involvement as a servant and not as a ruler. The third meaning, ‘duty,’ arises naturally from the second meaning. In the context of this chapter, we choose to translate *officium* with *task*. Calvin investigates what the functions and the tasks of teachers and ministers are.\(^3\)

Calvin’s strongly functional, task-orientated approach is also evidenced by the use of words in this chapter. The most frequently used terms are *munus*, literally—‘task,’ which occurs 16 times out of a total of 98 locations in the third chapter in Book IV, and *ministerium*, literally—‘service, task, office, serving,’ which occurs 16 times out of a total of 105 locations in the third chapter in Book IV.\(^4\) The noun *function*, literally meaning ‘implementation,’ is used 22 times in Book IV, four of which occur in the third chapter.

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The first significant sentence of the third chapter reads: “Iam de ordine dicendum est quo Ecclesiam suam gubernari voluit Dominus.”\(^5\) When referring to ministry, Calvin uses the language of church tradition: ministry is a matter of *ordo*, literally—‘rank.’ The verb ‘to ordain’ is derived from this word. The literal meaning is: ‘to be allocated your place.’ This terminology was already being used during the Middle Ages, and the Council of Trent also made use of the concept. In a sense, Calvin is much closer to the Tridentine theology of ministry than we might suppose at first sight. He, of course, does not share such specific Roman Catholic elements as those concerned with sacerdotal priesthood, but he shares many principles and concepts with Roman Catholic theology.

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\(^3\) The same interpretation of the meaning of the title can be found on p. 6 in H.B. Weijland, “Teveel gewicht? Over ouderlingen en diakenen in de calvinistische traditie,” *Kerk en Theologie* 43 (1992) 1, 5–12.

\(^4\) According to W. Herrenbrück, “Presbytery and Leadership in the Church” in: D. Willis and M. Welker (ed.), *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions* (Grand Rapids /Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 293. Calvin rarely uses the expression *ministerium* in his writings and prefers the term *munus*.

\(^5\) OS V. 42, 20–21.