This paper examines John Calvin’s theology in order to raise up universally relevant ecclesiological themes that are essential to a common ecclesiology which all Christians share. The method of this effort is generally ecumenical. More precisely, it is guided by principles of the subdiscipline of comparative ecclesiology. One phase of comparative ecclesiology examines the history of the discipline of ecclesiology and by comparison notices the differences that mark the understandings of the Christian churches across its history.\footnote{Roger Haight, \textit{Christian Community in History}, I–II (New York: Continuum International, 2004–2005).} Another phase of comparative ecclesiology proposes a description of the living ecclesiology that all Christians share in common, if not together. It strives to find those dimensions of an understanding of the church that are operative in most—if not all—understandings of the church. On the assumption that ecclesologies reflect the actual life of the churches, a comparison of various ecclesiologies allows one to discern certain foundational dimensions of ecclesial existence as such.\footnote{See Roger Haight, “Comparative Ecclesiology,” in \textit{The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church}, ed. by Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 392–393; Idem., \textit{Ecclesial Existence: Christian Community in History}, III (New York: Continuum International, 2009).}

While this is not an explicitly comparative essay, it arises out of the background of a quest for what Christians share in common. It turns to Calvin because of the comprehensive and integral character of his ecclesiology and the wide authority and influence that it still enjoys across many denominations. The search for the foundations of ecclesiology in an ecclesial existence means that the first priority of this essay is not to reproduce Calvin’s ecclesiology as he addressed it to Genevans and the wider church in the sixteenth century. Generally speaking Calvin did not do ecclesiology ‘from below,’ although some aspects of his ecclesiology were adaptations of practices already in place. Rather, the primary intent of this essay is to draw Calvin’s thought forward into the twenty-first century and to
propose ways in which it is relevant to all the churches in the present-day context of Western societies.

Doing this clearly in a short space will require some definitions of terms, an introduction to the language employed, and more explanation of the method. Thus the chapter will have two distinct parts. The first, entitled 'Presuppositions,' lays down the assumptions and concepts that are being employed. For example, the term 'spirituality' is not typical of Calvin’s theology and this raises the question of its appropriateness when discussing his thought. These considerations, then, will set up the second constructive part entitled ‘Three [Ecclesiological] Themes from Calvin.’ This part represents the heart of the thesis, namely, that an appreciation of some central convictions about the church that were Calvin’s are universally relevant and essential for any understanding of a common ecclesial spirituality.

**Presuppositions**

The most important presuppositions of this discussion lie imbedded in the phrase that appears in its title: ‘a common ecclesial spirituality.’ A good place to begin is with the term ‘spirituality.’ There is no common agreed meaning of ‘spirituality,’ and thus it becomes incumbent on anyone using it to explain what it refers to. In this essay spirituality means the way persons or a group lead their lives in relation to what they consider ultimate truth and reality. Christian spirituality consists in human lives lived before God as God is revealed in Jesus Christ. The closest term for this meaning of ‘spirituality’ in Calvin’s *Institutes* may be paraphrased as ‘the Christian life’ as that is described in Book III. Spirituality embraces the whole of Christian life, not just prayer, worship, and sacrament. It includes the internal discipline described by a theology of the cross, the use of creatures and the things of this world according to God’s creative intent, and Calvin’s formula for stewardship. For example, he believes that scripture regulates human use of earthly things. “It decrees that all those things were so given to us by the kindness of God, and so destined

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