Calvin and the confessions of the Reformation

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This article discusses the complicated question of the connection between Calvin and the confessions of the Presbyterian Reformed tradition. Firstly, a contrast is drawn to the question of the connection between Luther and the Lutheran confessions. It is noted that here a closed canon of Lutheran confessions exists, and Luther himself wrote three of the documents. On the other hand, there is no closed canon of Reformed confessions. However, there is a broad consensus concerning which Reformed confessions from the 16th century are classical. In this article a synopsis is provided of this list, and it is discovered that Calvin himself only wrote one of the classical Reformed confessional documents, although he influenced some others. The article then continues to discuss Calvin's own contribution, his Catechism of 1542/1545. The historical context of writing in which this Catechism is sketched, its use in Geneva is described, and the outline of the Catechism is mentioned. The article continues to discuss why Calvin thought there was a need for a catechism, and why he wrote it in Latin and sent it to East Friesland. In conclusion the author explains why he has discussed Calvin's Catechism, instead of focusing on the English Confession of 1556.

The subject I have been given turns out on closer examination to be somewhat more complicated than it appears. To make this clearer by way of contrast: If we were to pose the question of Luther and Lutheran confessions, an initial answer could be simply and quickly reached, namely, the canon of Lutheran confessions was effectively closed with the Formula of Concord in 1577 and the 1580 *Book of Concord* contains, alongside the Formula, the following documents:

- The three Early Church Creeds
- Luther's Shorter Catechism
- Luther's Larger Catechism
- The Augsburg Confession (by Philip Melanchthon)
- The Apology of the Confession (also Melanchthon)
- Luther's Schmalkald Articles
- Melanchthon's Treatise on The Primacy and Power of the Pope.

If one were to enquire about Luther's contribution, one can point at once to the three documents from his pen that were included in the final collection, along with the three from Melanchthon. In both cases the question of their share can be relatively simply answered, at least on the surface. (I leave aside here the complete marginalisation of Melanchthon by the Gnesiolutherans in the last years of his life and the divisions of the Lutheran confessional churches in the following years – the very problem the Formula of Concord was designed to resolve.)

It will be noticed that these documents are of various different characters. They include two catechisms, one confessional statement of Lutheran faith together with an account of points under dispute with the Roman Catholic Church, alongside its expanded explanation and defence, one list of declarative articles and one theological tract. That points to one significant preliminary question: What is meant by describing a document as a 'confession' and what qualifies it to be called such? In the Lutheran case, at least by the time of the Formula of Concord, this means that a confession is a binding and authoritative statement of faith, recognised and affirmed as such within the (Lutheran) communion – what in the Church of Scotland and Presbyterian Reformed tradition is classically described as a subordinate standard.

Furthermore, the general conservative Lutheran conviction is that the canon is closed: There can be no new Lutheran confession. This is not merely an abstract question. In May 1934 the Erlangen church historian Hermann Sasse departed early from the Confessing Church Assembly in Barmen-Wuppertal in order not to have to vote for or against the Barmen Theological Declaration. Not that he was against its goal which was to strengthen resistance to the party of the so-called German Christians; but he recognised the implicitly confessional character of the text, its structure, content and language and felt unable as a conservative Lutheran theologian

to subscribe to *that*. To this day, the declaration is generally treated in Reformed and United member churches of the *Evangelische Kirche Deutschland* (EKD) as a confession, but not in the Lutheran Church.

The situation with Reformed confessions and Calvin's relation to them, both in the 16th century and up to the present, is vastly more complex. There is no generally agreed – let alone closed – canon of Reformed confessions – and there are a lot more than seven of them![1] Indeed they are still being created: one may think here of the collection edited by Lukas Vischer (1982) a quarter of a century ago, *Reformed witness today*, to say nothing of the current diversity of opinion as to whether the World Communion of Reformed Churches's (WARC) *Declaration of Accra* is also entitled to be named *The Confession of Accra*.

One may however say that there is a broad consensus amongst a number of Reformed traditions that a certain constellation of Reformed Confessions from the 16th century may properly claim a kind of classical character. This constellation is variously reflected in Wilhelm Niesel's *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen* of 1937, in Arthur C. Cochrane's *Reformed confessions* (1966), in the 1974 *Proposed Book of Confessions* of the then Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS)[2] and in the more recent selection, *Reformierte bekenntnisschriften*, edited by Georg Plasger and Matthias Freudenberg (2005) (see Table 1).

Calvin appears here as the undisputed author only of the Genevan Confession of 1542/1545, though in fact he also supplied draft material for the Gallican Confession and Church Discipline that therefore can serve to multiply his contribution (even more when it is remembered how much the Belgic Confession of 1561 drew on the Gallican text).[3] But the Genevan Reformer does not dominate the field. The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism certainly owed something to Calvin, but also to Melanchthon and Luther; and the author of the Second Helvetic Confession was not Calvin but Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor as Antistes in Zurich.

Calvin did not, however, only write one confessional document and influence some others. His concern for an agreed confessional statement to be subscribed to by the population of Geneva dates back to his first term of service there, from 1536–1538. Admittedly, modern study suggests that the confession drafted then (and possibly already presented to the city council on 10 November 1536 along with the *Articles concerning the Organization of the Church*) may have been as much (or more) the work of Farel as of Calvin[4] (Reid 1954:25–33).[5] Like the *Articles*, which were approved on 16 January 1537, this text was submitted to the city council as a proposal of the ministers, without naming or identifying a particular author. Its purpose was in any case less that of constituting an element in an ordered ecclesiastical structure than of ensuring that the population of Geneva openly affirmed the Reformed faith.[6] This aim proved more difficult to realise effectively than the ministers had anticipated and within a year and a half was torpedoed by their expulsion from the city. Not that the Genevans wished to go back on the Reformation, but for the time being the majority in the city council were of the opinion that they could find a better way forward without the help of Calvin, Farel and Coraut.

We need not here rehearse how the following years led to a reversal of that conviction and to the invitation extended to Calvin to return to Geneva,[7] which he did in September 1541 after a long hesitation and with what might well be called limited enthusiasm. Once back, he set rapidly to work, both on the reorganisation of the ministry, the ecclesiastical ordinances, the order of public worship (Heron 2007) and the text of his 1542 catechism – the document that concerns us here – which appeared first in French and then three years later in Latin (Reid 1954:83–87, 88–139; Saxer 1997:1–9, 10–135; Torrance 1959:3–65). In his farewell address to the pastors in 1564 Calvin briefly describes the emergence of this text after his return to Geneva:

> On my return from Strasbourg I hurriedly wrote the catechism. I wished on no account to take over my office before they had sworn me an oath on these two points, namely to hold to the catechism and the church order. As I wrote the catechism they came to collect the hand-sized pieces of paper and [*to*] bring them to the printer. Although Master Pierre Viret was then in the town, think you, I never showed him any of it. I never had the time. I have indeed sometimes thought of revising it if I had had the time. (Freudenberg 1997:301)

Saxer's (1997) edition gives a full and detailed introduction, which I reproduce here in abbreviated form:

> In 1542 Calvin replaced his catechism of 1537 with a work entirely new in form and in part also in content. Both resulted from his stay in Strasbourg and the influence of its theology, church order and catechetical tradition. [… *The catechism*] was

1.What is still the standard collection, *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* (Müller [1903] 1987), numbers 58 documents from 1523–1902. The new German comprehensive edition, *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* (Mühling & Opitz 2008–2012) arrived in 2007 as volume 1(3) covering the years 1550–1558, containing documents 36 (the 1552 Anglican Book of Common Prayer with Catechism) to 48 (Brazilian Confession of Faith of 1557/1558). By 2012 it had reached volume 3(1), containing documents 65–72 from the years 1570–1599, of which the only English text is number 69 (1581), sometimes called the Second Scottish Confession but also known by a variety of other names including the Negative Confession, the King's Confession and the National Covenant.

2.The American Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* has gone through various permutations since the then United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) 'adopted in 1967 a new confession, the Confession of 1967, and a Book of Confessions which includes the Westminster Confession (with the revisions enacted through the years by that Church) and the Shorter Catechism along with the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, the Scots Confession of 1560, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession and the Barmen Declaration' (Leith 1982:97–98). This book therefore included the 2nd Helvetic Confession but not Calvin's Catechism. The 1974 PCUS source drawn on for the Table 1 given here puts this the other way round. The current official constitution of the now Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) reverts to the pattern of 1967 with the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession as its 16th century selection.

3.One might also add here the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549, the Eucharistic agreement between Geneva and Zurich – but this is not a comprehensive confession of faith.

4.Calvin [1545] 1997.

5.The 'catechism' ('instruction') which precedes the confession here in Saxer's edition (1997) is clearly Calvin's work – but it is more a theological tract than a catechism and significant above all for the development of Calvin's systematic theological thinking between the first and second editions of the *Institute*. Significant by contrast with the later catechism of 1542/1545 is the order of the main themes: in 1537 it was (following Luther's model) Law; Faith; Prayer; Sacraments (cf. n. 18 below, Hesselink 1997).

6.Similarly the articles about a church order submitted at that time were not a sketch for a church constitution but a series of practical proposals for building up a Reformed church and community in Geneva.

7.In the meantime Coraut had died and Farel was established in Neuchâtel.

TABLE 1: Plasger and Feudenberg's *Reformed confessions*.

Niesel	Cochrane	PCUS	Plasger or Freudenberg
-	Zwingli's Articles of 1523	-	-
-	Bernese Theses of 1528	-	Bernese Theses of 1528
-	Tetrapolitan Confession of 1530	-	-
-	-	-	Zwingli's Fidei Ratio (1530)
-	1st Basle Confession of 1534	-	-
-	1st Helvetic Confession of 1536	-	-
-	Lausanne Articles of 1536	-	-
-	Genevan Confession of 1536	-	-
Calvin's Catechism of 1542 (French)	-	Calvin's Catechism of 1542	Calvin's Catechism of 1545 (Latin)
-	English Confession of Geneva, 1556	-	-
Confessio Gallicana of 1559	Confessio Gallicana of 1559	-	Confessio Gallicana of 1559
Church Discipline of 1559	-	-	-
Confessio Scotica of 1560	Confessio Scotica of 1560	Confessio Scotica of 1560	Confessio Scotica of 1560
Genevan Ordinances of 1561	-	-	-
Confessio Belgica of 1561	Confessio Belgica of 1561	-	-
Palatine Church Order of 1563	-	-	-
Heidelberg Catechism of 1563	Heidelberg Catechism of 1563	Heidelberg Catechism of 1563	Heidelberg Catechism of 1563
2nd Helvetic Confession of 1566	2nd Helvetic Confession of 1566	-	2nd Helvetic Confession of 1566
Emden Synod of 1571	-	-	-
Herborn Synod of 1586	-	-	-

PCUS, Presbyterian Church in the United States.

> now [*formulated*] by contrast with that of 1537 in the form of questions and answers.
>
> The Genevan church order (Reid 1954:62, 69) provided that each Sunday at 12 o'clock the children be catechised in the three town churches, St. Pierre, Madeleine and St. Gervais. The parents and teachers were strongly urged to ensure their attendance and bring them along. Four times a year on the Sunday before communion a public questioning was held at which the children had to answer or cite a summary of the catechism.[8] To this end the catechism was divided [*from the printing of 1548*] into 55 sections so that it could be completely handled in the course of a year (Reid 1954:84–87). This device was later followed by the Palatinate church order for the Heidelberg Catechism.
>
> The Genevan church devised no other confession of its own and later accepted the Swiss reformed confessions such as the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549 and the *Second Helvetic Confession* of 1566. The catechism served, however, as the internal doctrinal norm. Whoever wished to become a minister in Geneva had, according to the church order, to commit himself to the content of the catechism.
>
> In the course of time Calvin's catechism became the official catechism in the churches of the French tongue. It also found widespread use through its translation not only into Latin, Greek and Hebrew, but also into Italian, Spanish and German – thus in the Netherlands, in Scotland, Poland and Hungary and served in particular as a significant model for the *Heidelberg Catechism*.[9]

The catechism is divided into four parts:

1. 'Of the Faith' (Sections 1–21a; Questions 1–131) contains an introduction, the interpretation of the Apostles' Creed, Faith, Justification, Good Works and Penitence.
2. 'Of the Law' (Sections 21b–33; Questions 132–232) contains the interpretation of the Ten Commandments, the Command of Love and the Use of the Law.
3. 'Of Prayer' (Sections 34–44a; Questions 232–295) contains the interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, formulated by some general teaching on prayer.
4. 'Of the Sacraments' (Sections 44b–55, Questions 296–373) contains first of all instruction on the proper way to worship God on the basis of his Word, then on the teaching office of the ministers, on the Sacraments in general, Baptism and the Lord's Supper as well as church discipline (pp. 1–3).

Reid's (1954) introduction is much briefer but does make a valid additional point in a tone which those who knew him will well remember:

> The Catechism is thrown by Calvin into the form of Question and Answer. Luther in his Shorter (though not in his Larger) Catechism had resuscitated this form from the dissuetude into which it had lapsed, and it so proved its usefulness that it was widely adopted and is still employed up to the present day. It can hardly be maintained that Calvin entirely avoided all the disadvantages that such a form imposes. By the time the Westminster Confession of Faith came to be written, for example, the form has acquired crispness and direction, and really does have the character of an interrogation or even examination. In the work before us, there is more of the character of dialogue between Minister and Child. Many of the queries of the Minister are unashamedly 'leading questions'; and at many points the Minister supplies as much to the substance of the doctrine as does the pupil under interrogation. Indeed, on occasion it almost appears that the roles of Minister and Child are transposed. For example, on page 109 (Question 148), to the extended comment of the Minister concerning the prohibition upon worshipping God in images, the Child replies: *Verum*, which is not unjustly translated: Quite right! (p. 83–84)

Two further questions that might be put are answered by Calvin himself. Firstly: Why precisely is there a need for a

8.The summary Calvin may have used is published in *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta II*, 1952, 152–157 – mercifully much shorter than the catechism! It appears to be based not on the 1542 catechism but on summaries drafted by Martin Bucer in 1537 (Saxer 1997:6). In *Institute* IV.xix.13 Calvin suggests the age of ten years as appropriate for the catechetical examination.

9.To give but one example, those who know the Westminster Shorter Catechism will recognise a certain similarity of question one there to the first question in Calvin's catechism as translated by Torrance (1959:5): 'What is the chief end of human life?' – 'To know God.'

catechism and regular catechising of children? Then: Why did Calvin feel it appropriate to put the catechism into Latin and send it to East Friesland? (Reid 1954:88).[10] Calvin addresses the first of these in his letter to the reader:

> It has always been a practice and diligent care of the Church that children be rightly brought up in Christian doctrine. To do this more conveniently, not only were schools formerly opened and individuals enjoined to teach their families properly, but also it was accepted public custom and practice to examine children in the Churches concerning the specific points which should be common and familiar to all Christians. That this be done in order, a formula was written out, called Catechism or Institute. After this, the devil, miserably rending the Church of God and bringing upon it his fearful destruction (of which the marks are all too evident in most parts of the world), subverted this sacred policy; nor did he leave surviving anything more than certain trivialities, which give rise only to superstitions, without any edifying fruit. Of this kind is that Confirmation, as they call it, made up of gesticulations which are more than ridiculous and suited rather to monkeys, and rest on no foundation. What we now bring forward, therefore, is nothing else than the use of a practice formerly observed by Christians and the true worshippers of God, and never neglected until the Church was wholly corrupted. (Reid 1954:88)[11]

The second question is answered most directly towards the end of the dedication when Calvin says that 'some of your number … expressly demanded in letters that I undertake it for their sake' (Reid 1954:91). But one may suspect that an earlier consideration was of special importance to him. After saying that it might be desirable, if not realistic, to aim for one common catechism in all the churches, he goes on to explain why he wrote in Latin. He could have said: because he could not expect the *Ostfriesen* to read French; but instead a very different aim is expressed:

> First, in this confused and divided state of Christendom, I judge it useful to have public testimonies by which Churches, that agree in Christian doctrine though widely separated in space, may mutually recognize each other. … To this end, while a consensus of faith still existed and flourished among all, bishops used once to send Synodal letters across the sea, with which, as by tokens, they might establish sacred communion between the Churches. How much more necessary it is now, in the dreadful devastation of the Christian world, that those Churches, which worship God rightly, few and dispersed and hedged about by the profane synagogues of Antichrist as they are, should give and receive mutually this sign of holy fellowship, and thereby be incited to that fraternal embrace of which I have spoken? And if this be necessary for today, what are we to think of posterity? About it I am more anxious than I almost dare to think. For unless God give miraculous assistance from heaven, I cannot avoid thinking that the world is threatened with extreme barbarism.[12] … All the more, then, must we labour to gather by our writings such remains of the Church, as may persist or even emerge after our death. There are other kinds of writing to show what are our views in all matters of religion; but what agreement in doctrine our Churches had among themselves cannot be observed with clearer evidence than from the Catechisms. For in them there appears not only what someone or another once taught, but what were the rudiments with which both the learned and the unlearned among us were from youth constantly instructed, all the faithful holding them as the solemn symbol of Christian communion. This indeed was my chief reason for publishing this Catechism. (Reid 1954:89–90)

It has been said that the *Ostfriesen* were not all uniformly delighted to receive this sign of brotherly unity and affection from Calvin, and if so, it was doubtless because of the implicit claim to a kind of episcopal responsibility reflected in this paragraph. Calvin could, and on occasion did in his letters, adopt an almost apostolic style which may not always have been appreciated by the recipients. Be that as it may, however, this Latin version of the catechism certainly contributed to its wider dissemination and lasting influence.

When I began writing this paper a few days ago in Erlangen, I visualised treating the Genevan Catechism much more briefly and then going on to another Genevan document, the English Confession of 1556, which as it happens I edited a few years ago for the *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* (Heron 2007:339–353). That on two grounds: the confession was presented to Calvin for approval; and though it itself was not the work of John Knox, it and the book of order of which it was a part, became a few years later the basis for Knox's Scottish *Book of Common Order*. But the discussion of the Genevan Confession just grow'd like Topsy, to fill all the available space. Not perhaps a bad thing after all.

10.Reid's note (1954:88) on East Friesland is potentially misleading: '*Sleumer's Kirchenlateinisches Wörterbuch* (Limburg-a-d-Lahn 1926) identifies this with the modern Prussia or Hanover.' *Ostfriesland* is the old north-western German *Grafschaft* or county with its capital in Emden, bordering on (Dutch) West Friesland. It was later incorporated in the Kingdom of Hanover and subsequently that of Prussia, but did not thereby change its geographic location! East Friesland was an early centre of Protestant preaching; the most prominent of the reformed leaders there in Calvin's day was the Polish baron John a Lasco (1499–1560, Superintendent in Emden 1542–1549). It later became a kind of extraterritorial base for the Dutch Reformation (cf. Pettegree 1992).

11.Calvin makes the same polemical point in his dedicatory letter to East Friesland: 'Besides I think it belongs to good example to testify to the world that we, who undertake the restitution of the Church, faithfully exert ourselves everywhere for the rightful return of the use of Catechism, abolished some centuries ago under the papacy. For this holy custom cannot be sufficiently commended for its usefulness: nor can the papists be sufficiently condemned for the flagrant corruption, because by turning it into puerile trifles they not only set it aside, but also basely misuse it as the occasion of impure and impious superstition. For they deck out that spurious Confirmation, which they have substituted in its place, like a harlot, with great splendour of ceremonies and splendid pomps without measure. They even, in wanting to adorn it, ornament it with execrable blasphemies, giving out that it is a sacrament of greater dignity than Baptism, and calling only half-Christians those that have not been besmeared with their rank oil. In fact the whole business consists in nothing but theatrical gesticulations, or rather the wanton sporting of monkeys, without even imitative skill.' For a fuller critique of the medieval practice of confirmation see *Institute* IV.xix.4-13. – Similar polemic against the Roman style of celebrating baptism and the Eucharist is to be found in Calvin's Genevan service order; cf. Heron (2010).

12.It may be that Calvin is thinking here not only of the conflicts within European Christendom but also of the threat resulting from the Osman conquest of central and eastern Hungary in these years.

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