

TRADITIONALISM AND RADICALISM IN  
THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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## CHAPTER 1



# TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN LATE ANTIQUITY

GREGORY NAZIANZEN AND CHRISTOLOGICAL  
SPIRITUALITY IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

### INTRODUCTION

Writing in the second half of the fourth century, Gregory Nazianzen (330–389) provides us with one of the classic examples of traditional Christian theology. Decades after the Edict of Mediolanum (313 AD), Christianity was no longer preoccupied with the threat of imminent persecution, so the dangers from outside became increasingly a matter of the past. It was time, however, to confront the dangers from within or the quite impressive wave of teachings that originated in the Christian church but that did not reflect the dogmatic morrow of the faith handed down through almost four hundred years of history. It was in this particular historical setting that Gregory wrote his works, in close connection with what he believed to be the very core of Christianity, namely, the teaching about Jesus Christ and about God as Trinity. Keenly aware that the church's convictions about Christ resulted in a certain type of practical behavior, Gregory was convinced that the life of those who declare themselves Christians was a life of faith, which is, in other words, a life of constant spirituality. Such a life, however, needs confirmation, but this confirmation is in itself bound to a definition. Gregory's most essential definition of faith, which is also the basis of Christian spirituality, has to do with the fundamental tenets of the Nicene Creed and especially with the way he sees Jesus Christ. This means that the

core of the Christian life is the image of Christ, namely, the way we understand Christ. Gregory is fully aware that our life is shaped by our perspective on Christ, so it is the correct interpretation of Christ's person and work that characterizes our spirituality. This is why it is utterly important to see Christ in light of Scripture; our lives are molded by our understanding of Christ himself. Man does not need a religious spirituality in general; what man needs is a Christological spirituality, namely, a life that is not informed by any image of Christ but a life heavily permeated by the correct image of Christ. This is what prompted Gregory to react against a series of antiorthodox teachings such as Arianism, Macedonianism, and Apollinarianism because a flawed interpretation of Christ leads to a crippled spirituality, while the correct interpretation of Christ is the very basis of our spiritual lives. It will be shown next how Gregory's reaction against these three teachings—and especially against Apollinarianism—prompted him to lay the foundation for traditional theology.

### A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF ARIANISM, MACEDONIANISM, AND APOLLINARIANISM

Gregory wrote four letters concerning the dogmatic errors of the teachings proliferated by Apollinarius: the *Letter to Nectarius*, Bishop of Constantinople;<sup>1</sup> the *Letter to Cleodnius the Priest against Apollinarius*;<sup>2</sup> *Against Apollinarius: The Second Letter to Cleodnius*;<sup>3</sup> and the *Letter to Olympius*.<sup>4</sup> The letters are relatively short, with the exception of the *Letter to Cleodnius the Priest against Apollinarius*, which is a little longer, but they convey Gregory's great concern about the spiritual damage that can result from the dissemination of erroneous teachings throughout the churches. The first, however, the *Letter to Nectarius, Bishop of Constantinople*, contains a very brief though illuminating presentation of the main dogmatic errors of Apollinarianism.<sup>5</sup> According to Gregory, who probably wrote the letter around the year 383 AD,<sup>6</sup> churches go through a very difficult time that can be described as real suffering. He even states that the situation of the suffering churches is so distinctively grave that the care or the love of God seems to have forsaken the very life of the churches. Gregory mentions his own physical suffering, which had it afflicted anybody else it would have seemed unbearable to him, but at the end of the day cannot even be compared to the suffering of the churches, which appear to have reached the brink of disaster. At this time, Gregory has not mentioned the very problem that

triggered the suffering of the churches, but the reader begins to understand that it is a dogmatic problem at issue when he sees that Gregory almost immediately mentions the word “heresy.” Thus he writes that the churches are in pain because some follow the heresies of Arius<sup>7</sup> and Eudoxius.<sup>8</sup> Gregory is evidently bothered by the heresy of Arianism, but he seems to be even more distraught by those followers who reportedly gained confidence in attracting more and more churches to their side. As far as Gregory is concerned, Arianism is a disease that causes a great deal of suffering to all churches.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the first feature of traditional theology—as seen in Gregory Nazianzen—is its willingness to treat doctrine very seriously to the point that all the teachings that do not reflect the content of its doctrinal core should be treated as malignant. For traditional theology, doctrine is crucially important for the simple reason that it directly affects the life of the church and that of believers; this is why any teaching that does not reflect the doctrine of the church is literally believed to be a disease that impairs the church in leading a spiritually sound life.

In addition to Arianism, Gregory mentions a second heresy when he tackles the issue of Macedonianism.<sup>10</sup> As grieved as he was by Arianism, whose followers captured more and more churches under their bad influence, Gregory seems on the verge of losing his patience when he talks about the heresy of Macedonianism. For him, the teachings of Macedonius<sup>11</sup> are not seen as a mere disease but rather as madness, especially because some of the heretics not only cast their malignant influence over churches but also had the audacity to claim the title of bishop for their own ecclesiastical offices. In connection with the heresy of Macedonianism, Gregory mentions two other names, those of Eleusius<sup>12</sup> and Eunomius<sup>13</sup>; the former appears to have endorsed the appointments of some heretics to bishoprics, while the latter—whom Gregory calls “our bosom evil”—seems to have regarded himself as somehow persecuted for the sake of his own beliefs. It is quite clear that Gregory was extremely concerned about the situation of the churches afflicted by heresy, and he could not bear the heresy itself. Nevertheless, he was nearly infuriated by the actions of some of the heretics, who not only spread heresies widely but also did their best to find access to Episcopal sees. This is why Gregory writes with regard to Eunomius that he “is no longer content with merely existing,” but he is now more and more confident in his attempts to attract people to his side while simultaneously complaining of being “injured” because of his theological convictions.<sup>14</sup>

Gregory's explanations bring us to the second feature of traditional theology, namely, its determination to label foreign teachings as not only malignant but also evil. This is a clear indication that doctrine and especially its content are not optional for the church. The church in general, and believers in particular, as members of the church, must not treat doctrine as a matter of personal choice but as a binding spiritual reality that bears unmediated influence over the personal and communitarian existence of the church. The church must always pay serious attention to doctrine as well as to all the teachings that circulate among its members, lest the quality of spiritual life be gravely diminished by heretical influences.

For Gregory, however, the two heresies he so tenaciously opposes—Arianism and Macedonianism—seem to be a bearable suffering. He himself and the churches with him look as if they had accustomed themselves to the situation. While Arianism had a longer history and Macedonianism a relatively shorter one at the time of Gregory's writing, both were pictured as problems that the church could eventually face with a certain degree of detachment because each of them downplayed the divinity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit, respectively, while keeping the reality of created humanity (in Jesus's case) within its originally designated limits, in the sense that the humanity of Christ, for instance, was believed to have had its starting point on earth as he was born into this world bearing the form of a human being. Thus both Orthodoxy and Arianism clung to the position that the humanity of Christ is a matter that pertains to his existence within the world's history. Regardless of whether Christ was seen as the eternal preexistent Logos of God (in Orthodoxy) or as a mere human being (in Arianism), his humanity had a starting point within human history. This seems to be the reason why, for Gregory, the heresies of Arianism and Macedonianism were somehow easier to handle: the beginnings of humanity were believed to have been confined to the realm of created history, while the idea of divinity remained untouched (even though not fully recognized with reference to Christ or to the Holy Spirit as far as Arianism and Macedonianism were concerned).

The third feature of traditional theology is therefore brought to light by Gregory, and this is the serious preoccupation with the historical life of Jesus Christ, with the accompanying realization that his earthly life was chronologically preceded by his metaphysical existence as the Logos of God. This does not mean that before we consider the actual and historical life of Jesus we could speak of a theoretical existence of a certain image of Christ that somehow

could reflect—in advance—his own humanity or the humanity of men and women in general. On the contrary, Jesus's historical existence was preceded by another type of existence—metahistorical but equally real, ontological, and actual—that presents him as a real person even before he began his physical life through incarnation.

Gregory's tone, however, changes radically when it comes to the presentation of a third heresy, which followed Arianism and Macedonianism. This is the "boldness of the Apollinarians," which for Gregory became some sort of a personal issue. While Gregory's grief as produced by the heresy of Apollinarius cannot be questioned, it is true nevertheless that he was personally annoyed by Nectarius's decision to grant them the right to assemble ecclesiastical meetings.<sup>15</sup> One cannot lose sight of the fact that Nectarius was Gregory's own successor to the Episcopal See of Constantinople<sup>16</sup>, and it was in this capacity that he allowed the Apollinarians to have church meetings. This is why Gregory elegantly accuses Nectarius of having overlooked the daring spirit of the Apollinarians, which eventually led to his decision to grant them the right to put together church meetings. Although Gregory expresses his lack of knowledge concerning the reasons why the very bishop of Constantinople eventually came to such a decision, he does not seem to be primarily bothered by the bishop's decision to allow the Apollinarians to have their own church meetings, but rather by the fact that the bishop's action gave them the right to hold ecclesiastical assemblies that had the same status (or equality) with those overseen by Gregory himself. This situation obviously placed Gregory in a position of equality with the Apollinarians, and vice versa, and it seems to have been this particular result that pushed Gregory to a firm response. He could not stand the idea that his own position was placed at the same level as that of heretics, so he informs Nectarius that he possesses a work written by Apollinarius himself (he does not give any further information about the work itself), which is very likely to have escaped Nectarius's attention. Gregory does not spend too many words on denigrating Apollinarius's work, which he evidently disliked, but he does say that its teachings go far beyond any heretical crookedness, which is just another way that Apollinarianism was, at least in his opinion, the chief of all heresies.<sup>17</sup>

Gregory's reaction outlines a fourth feature of traditional theology, which is always determined to present, explain, criticize, and therefore limit the influence of all the teachings that threaten the dogmatic integrity of the church. Thus, traditional theology is

constantly vigilant, critical, and militant when it comes to countering the weight of anti-orthodox teachings.

### THE SPIRITUALITY OF A FULLY DIVINE CHRIST WITHOUT A HUMAN BODY BEFORE THE INCARNATION

At this point, Gregory begins to elaborate on the main tenets of Apollinarianism. As far as he was concerned, the heresy of Apollinarius had three fundamental teachings. First, the preexistence of Christ's body in heaven pushes Gregory to a fierce criticism of Apollinarius's creed.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that Gregory's critique is a mixture of Orthodox affirmations and Apollinarius's ideas. Thus, in order to criticize Apollinarius's belief in Christ's preexistent body in heaven, Gregory writes that, as far as Orthodoxy is concerned, the body of Christ was assumed by the Lord in order to reshape our nature, but this reality happened within our created history. Apollinarius, however, believed that the body of Christ, or the flesh of the Only-begotten Son (to use Gregory's words), which was assumed by our Lord for the remodeling of our human nature, is not a new reality for the existence of the divine Logos, in the sense that the divine, body-less Logos accepted a human body in order to shape again the very nature of all human bodies.<sup>19</sup> For Apollinarius, the concept of body, or the human body, is intrinsically linked to the everlasting existence of the divine Logos. In other words, the body, or the carnal nature, was in the Logos from the very beginning, from eternity to eternity. For Gregory, the teaching of the eternity of the body with reference to the divine Logos is nothing but a "monstrous assertion" that, even if he does not say it at this particular point, represents the total failure to understand the inner reality of God's own nature. Gregory knows that the imposition of the idea of a preexistent body within the Godhead is a misrepresentation of God's own trinitarian being as well as of our own creation and salvation. Regardless of the paramount importance of the human body for Christ's incarnation but also for our salvation, the body cannot coexist with the divine Logos prior to the incarnation because the distinction between our creatureliness and God's uncreated existence would be blurred. At the same time, and also as a consequence of this, the reality of original sin, which virtually destroyed the created human body to the point that it needed a thorough reshaping, is rendered useless. The very idea of creation, with reference to human beings, becomes equally useless if one accepts that the reality of the body is preexistent to our own history. Gregory was fully



aware that it was either that creation needed a radical reassessment or that the being of God had to be rethought should Apollinarius be right in his conviction that the body of Christ was part of the Holy Trinity before the incarnation.<sup>20</sup>

Gregory also identifies two biblical texts used by Apollinarius to back his belief in the preexistence of Christ's body before incarnation. The first text is John 3:13, which reads that "no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven" (KJV), and the second is I Corinthians 15:47: "The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven" (KJV).<sup>21</sup> As far as Gregory is concerned, Apollinarius is wrong in asserting Christ's preexistent body because the phrase "the Son of man which is in heaven" does not mean that "man . . . is in heaven" before "no man . . . ascended up to heaven."<sup>22</sup> In other words, it does not mean that Christ had a body like that of any other man before the moment he began his ministry on earth. The Bible's affirmation that "the Son of man which is in heaven" is, for Gregory, a reference to Christ's eternal capacity of being the "Son of man," or the one who has always been appointed to carry out the salvation of humanity. Thus, the "Son of man" is a title rather than a designation of his inner nature. Moreover, it is clear in Gregory's mind, the biblical text that reads "no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven" does not refer to a temporal sequence in the sense that "no man hath ascended up to heaven" but then there was a man "that came down from heaven." Actually, and it is here that Apollinarius got things wrong, the "he" from "he that came down from heaven" does not need to refer to a "man" or to a "bodily man" just to complete, somehow logically, the previous phrase "no man hath ascended up to heaven."<sup>23</sup> So the reference to the "man" in the first part of the verse does not necessarily imply a second reference to another "man"; the "he" in the second part of the verse could well be an indication of Christ, who bears the title "Son of man" in order not to present his inner nature but rather to disclose the nature of his salvific work. Gregory understood that juxtaposition of the idea of the body and the reality of Christ's preexistence as divine Logos was utterly false because the uncreated nature of God could not have been joined to the created nature of man from eternity. The same is true with reference to the way Apollinarius seems to have understood the second text because if the first man is of the earth and the second is the Lord from heaven, it is clear that Apollinarius did not understand the biblical references to the first and the second

man as being part of a timeline; on the contrary, it appears that for Apollinarius the two references must be seen as simultaneously valid because there is a man who exists on earth (a reference to created humanity) and another man who exists in heaven (a reference to Christ before his incarnation). Such an understanding of the biblical material raises serious questions about the incarnation itself, and Gregory was not unaware of this. Let alone what the incarnation is in reality and what happened to the divine Logos as he assumed human nature/body within Mary's womb, Gregory seems to be more concerned about the very nature or even the quality of the man about whom Apollinarius said he had been in heaven from the beginning.<sup>24</sup>

It is now that a fifth characteristic of traditional theology arises in Gregory's thought, which is the awareness that Jesus Christ's human nature was not part of his existence before incarnation. Although Jesus Christ is the very same person before and after incarnation, his nonphysical existence before incarnation is distinct from his physical life after incarnation, and traditional theology is always willing to affirm this reality. Despite the obvious difference before his pre-physical existence before history and his physical existence in history, Christ has always been the Logos of God before and after incarnation. The problem with Apollinarius's first error is not primarily the dogmatic flaw itself but the fact that the image of Christ it attempts to provide leads to a spirituality that hails human nature to a point that has never been intended for it. The picture of Christ having a body or a human body from eternity pushes humanity near the very nature of God, in the sense that human nature is part of the Godhead. Leaving aside the logical impossibility of such a situation given the uncreated and eternal being of God on the one hand, and the created and historical nature of human existence on the other, the real issue at stake here is the fact that our humanity can be wrongly thought of as being part of the divine nature. Such a perspective could lead to an overrated confidence in our own nature, which in turn leads to a problematic view of our relationship with God. If our bodies or our nature has always been part of God's nature, then the most problematic aspect that immediately results is the reality of sin. It is not an issue of how sin appeared or which are its consequences but the very fact that sin does not matter any longer, at least not to its full extent. If our nature has been with God and in God since the beginning, we can be confident that our innermost constitution has divine attributes. In other words, we can function as human beings in a way that can be defined as divine. Then we can fully rely on our

minds as well as on our actions because what we are is ultimately and closely connected to the very being of God. We should no longer trust God for guidance but rather our own intellect, our own will, and our own feelings. This also means that the person and the work of the Holy Spirit of God are presented as having no use for us because if we can fully trust our own nature, there is no need for us to believe and rely on the daily guidance of God through the Spirit.

The last but certainly not the least of the problems caused by Apollinarius's teachings is related to the fact that, as we no longer need to place our entire trust in God, God himself becomes more and more distant from us despite the claim that our nature is part of God's nature. That may be the case for Apollinarius, but as we live in history and God is nowhere to be seen (plus the fact that the guidance as well as the assurance brought in our lives by the Holy Spirit is no longer a necessity), the odd result is a growing distance between ourselves and God. We no longer need God for anything because our own nature, which has been with God forever in the preexistent body of Christ, is sufficient for whatever we will, think, feel, and eventually do in our lives. Thus, our lives are guided based on a spirituality that no longer focuses on Christ but rather on ourselves. In this way Christ becomes an image of humanity, a symbol of what we are, and a model for what we need to do. In Apollinarius, the true spirituality of Christ is turned into an anthropological spirituality that is heavily influenced by what man thinks of himself. Therefore, man builds an image of himself that is far greater than the Bible allows for because Christ is perceived in terms that mix divine nature and human nature to the point of their total confusion. Gregory was aware of this, so the next step for him was to tackle the issue of the nature of the man/human nature, which has been, according to Apollinarius, with Christ from the beginning.

### THE SPIRITUALITY OF A FULLY DIVINE CHRIST WITH A HUMAN MIND AFTER THE INCARNATION

This is how Gregory comes to the second teaching of Apollinarius, namely, the mindless body of the man in heaven.<sup>25</sup> As it turns out, it is not exactly a man about whom Apollinarius says he is in heaven, but rather a body that somehow shares a very close connection with the divine nature. Gregory writes that, in Apollinarius, there is a man who came down from above in order to enter our historicity. As if this were not enough of a dogmatic problem, Gregory underlines that Apollinarius works with the rather peculiar assumption that this

man does not have a mind of his own.<sup>26</sup> What he has, as some sort of a replacement for his mind or his human mind, is the divinity of Christ. So it is the divinity of Christ or, to use Gregory's rendering, the "Godhead of the Only-begotten," that works as the mind of the man in heaven.<sup>27</sup> This creates a serious problem for Gregory because, according to his dual anthropology, man's constitution is made up by the body and the soul, but it appears that the divinity of Christ is the third aspect of man's being. The problem gets bigger as, according to Gregory, in Apollinarius the image of Christ before incarnation incorporates a body, a soul, and his own divinity but without the human mind, which is replaced by "God the Word."<sup>28</sup> So it is as if Apollinarius believed in a human carcass, in the sense of a physical body, which has a mindless soul. This is a real issue for Gregory because this not only impairs the divinity of Christ, which is pictured as stuck to humanity from the very start, but also seriously damages man's actual constitution as a human being. Consequently, Apollinarius got it wrong twice: first by crayoning a flawed divinity for Christ and second by presenting us with a partial humanity for the same Christ. It is as if Christ were seen as a seriously handicapped divinity in both his divinity and his humanity.<sup>29</sup>

Gregory does not elaborate on this dogmatic error at this point, but his analysis presents us with a sixth feature of traditional theology, which is the realization that Jesus Christ's divinity and humanity must be correctly linked to his prephysical existence before incarnation and his physical life after incarnation. This is why traditional theology will always oppose any image of Christ that distorts Christ's divinity, humanity, or both. The reason for such criticism is that a deficient presentation of Christ cannot produce a healthy spirituality within churches, so this is why they suffer greatly, as Gregory is very keen to underline. This portrait of a crippled divinity cannot lead to trust when it comes to man's salvation; on the contrary, it can have the reverse effect on people. Such a deity is not worthy of respect, let alone trust; neither God nor man, this theological "product" gives rise to pity and mistrust because it seems totally unable to handle the problems of humanity. If he does not have a human mind, he cannot sympathize with us, and if he does not have a full-fledged divine nature, he cannot solve our problems since he is only a little above us. It may be true that some people would prefer such a God because he can neither command nor help us. This leaves humanity itself and the world in its entirety to the discretion of human individuals, who feel powerful enough to act fearlessly because there is no higher justice to react against them. In others, however, the image of such

a deity will never trigger any feelings of awe, respect, or reverence. At the end of the day, it cannot yield such emotions because he is himself totally incapable of them. The divinity of such a Christ can of course understand the notion of human feelings as well as grasp the full extent of man's daily problems, but without a human mind there seems almost nothing he can practically do for them, at least not in the real sense of the word, which involves the full participation of such a God in the reality of man's actual existence. A divine-human God without a human mind is of no use to a people who have a human mind and cannot lead their lives without making use of it. As damaged as it is by sin, the human mind needs to be recuperated by a God who has a human mind, and Gregory knows this very well. The churches seem to suffer because the people in them who accepted this distorted image of Christ probably found themselves in the very difficult position of having placed their trust in a God who is totally incapable of understanding them or their trust. Moreover, a God without a human mind is a terrifying construct because there cannot be a true reciprocal participation between divinity and humanity within such a being. The human mind is human awareness, and there is no logical reason why a divine mind should take the place of a human mind, given that the human body has always been with the divine nature itself. Why should the body be better than the mind? This is only one question that could cast a serious degree of doubt over Apollinarius's distorted image of the Son of man.

### THE SPIRITUALITY OF A FULLY DIVINE CHRIST SEEN AS SOVEREIGN GOD

The third error made by Apollinarius, which for Gregory is "the most terrible of all," has to do with an issue that represents the coronation of his previous two mistakes. Thus, following his conviction that Christ, God's Logos, has had a body as part of his inner divine nature from the very beginning or from a time prior to the incarnation, as well as his belief in the fact that this particular body was without a mind, Apollinarius reaches the somehow logical conclusion that Christ, which evidently includes his divinity, is mortal.<sup>30</sup> As is quite clear in the way Gregory formulates his critique, he is absolutely bewildered by this last of Apollinarius's convictions but before presenting the error in itself, he takes time to present an image of Christ that, from the very start, is totally opposed to that of Apollinarius. Consequently, for Gregory, Christ is seen in a way that presents his absolute sovereignty over everything related to the

fundamentals of human existence. This is why, in Gregory's majestic presentation, Christ appears as *the* God who presides over the furthest-reaching realities of man's life. Actually, Gregory makes use of three major phrases to present us with a victorious image of Christ.<sup>31</sup>

First, Gregory sees Christ as the Only-begotten God.<sup>32</sup> So far, when dealing with Apollinarius's first and second errors, he used only the phrases "Only-begotten Son" and "Only-begotten." Now, however, lest any misunderstanding should creep in, he writes that the Only-begotten Son and the Only-begotten who is in heaven are actually one and the same person, namely, the Only-begotten God.<sup>33</sup> Gregory knows that it is now time to present Christ in colors that leave no doubt about his divinity, so he makes it clear that the Son, the Only-begotten Son of God, is without any doubt whatsoever true God. It is now that one can fully understand that Gregory had an accurate perception of why Apollinarius's presentation of Christ as a human divinity or even as a crippled divine-human kind of God can indeed cause a great deal of suffering within the church. Apollinarius's Christ was not God in the true sense of the word; his deity could be neither trusted nor relied upon for anything at all. All those who placed their trust in such a deity would eventually end up in spiritual failure. Christ must not be seen as a superior kind of man with divineline attributes, nor must he be presented as a God who is not in fact a full-fledged God; in order to be fully trusted, Christ must be presented as God, the true God, and this is exactly what Gregory had in mind when, in addition to his previous phrases, the Only-begotten Son and the Only-begotten, he eventually captured in a few plain words the very nature of Christ as God. Christ is the Only-begotten God; in other words, he is God and for that reason he can be fully trusted in all respects. This is the correct image of Christ, which builds in us a spirituality that does not end in spiritual suffering but in a life fully characterized by trust and confidence in Christ. Without a Christ who is God, true God, human beings tend to either distance themselves from a God who cannot understand them or focus on their own faculties and capacities, which they trust to be divine. This is why it is only the spirituality of Christ that leads humanity to the true God who sent Christ, also true God of true God, to enrich our lives. This reality leads to the awareness that there is a God above us whom we all must acknowledge as our final authority in all matters pertaining to life. There is someone above us to whom we owe respect and obedience.<sup>34</sup>

Second, in line with his presentation of Christ as God, Gregory depicts the Son of God as the "Judge of all."<sup>35</sup> It is clear that for

Gregory only God can be the judge of all human beings, so this characterization of Christ actually strengthens the first. This image of Christ is utterly crucial for humanity because it directly informs our spirituality as well as our way of life. The very essence of Christian ethics is encapsulated in the image of Christ as the Judge of all.<sup>36</sup> We must be painfully but also happily aware that the possibility of true justice does exist for us. It does not lie within this world or with the authorities of this world; it is in Christ and Christ will eventually impart true justice to everyone. We must all lead lives that do justice to this image of Christ because we are now allowed to behave or even believe as we please but only as it is just to behave and believe: we must all behave in full belief that Christ, our God, will judge us as well as everyone else in accordance with his full divine justice. This conviction must always be part of our inner spirituality as a constant proof that this God, Christ himself, really exists.<sup>37</sup>

Third, Christ is presented by Gregory as the Prince of life, but his image goes hand in hand with his fourth depiction of Christ as the Destroyer of death.<sup>38</sup> Life and death are definitely the essential coordinates of the human existence, and Gregory wants to make sure that Christ is above them in the sense that there is nothing within the created realm of humanity that escapes his sovereign rule.<sup>39</sup> Concerning our life, Christ is the Prince, the one who rules over it, owns it, and keeps it. Concerning our death, Christ is the Destroyer, the only one who can make it go away.<sup>40</sup> This is how Gregory pictures Christ as the Lord of life, the God who wants the best for us not only by ruling over our lives but also by putting an end to death, so that our existence may continue with a life totally surrendered to God.<sup>41</sup> This is the essence of Christian spirituality, namely, the conviction that Christ is God, the God who can both keep and save our lives from the impending death caused by sin. It should be highlighted here that, even if he does not say anything about sin in this letter, Gregory's entire manner of writing, as well as his choice of presenting Christ as God, confirms his deep awareness of human sin. Man's life is so permeated by sin that the only way to genuine life, the only way to true spirituality is belief in Christ as the God who judges us, keeps us, and saves us.

To sum up—and this is the seventh feature of traditional theology as elaborated by Gregory—Christ is fully divine, which means that he is fully God and fully man at the same time. Traditional theology confesses the complete divinity and humanity of Christ by presenting him as the Only-begotten God, then as the Son of God who has dominion over everything—it is here that the image of the judge

plays a crucial role—and finally as the only being that can handle life and death as he pleases. This threefold Christological imagery is a confirmation of Christ’s existence before incarnation, then of his ministry and death after incarnation, and finally of his resurrection and ascension to heaven. Traditional theology is based on this “cycle” of Christ’s existence: metaphysical before his incarnation in history, physical in history, and metaphysical again—but with a human resurrected body—after his ascension.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE TO NECTARIUS FOR THE SAKE OF HEALTHY CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Having exposed the three main errors of Apollinarianism, Gregory explains that there is no need to press forward with other dogmatic mistakes. These three should suffice for a concise presentation of the peril they represent for the churches. This is why, toward the end of his letter, Gregory takes a little time for some personal as well as practical advice to Nectarius.<sup>42</sup> Gregory’s advice discloses his concern for the churches but also his desire to have the teachings of Apollinarius driven out of the churches. Thus, he tells Nectarius that what he needs to do is prevent the Apollinarians from gathering and teaching. In other words, he quite abruptly suggests that Nectarius should do two main things: first, cancel the Apollinarians’ right to assemble as churches, and second, cancel their permission to teach their views within churches.<sup>43</sup> If these two actions are not taken, Gregory warns that two opposite realities may emerge: first, if the Apollinarians’ right to meet as churches is not canceled, people will eventually understand that their erroneous teachings are more important than the Orthodox doctrines of the church, and second, if their permission to teach in churches is not dealt with, people will reach the conclusion that the Orthodox teachings of the church are in fact the ones that should be condemned.<sup>44</sup>

In order to make things clear, Gregory resorts to the natural principle that cannot allow for two opposite affirmations to be true at the same time. With reference to the teachings of Apollinarius, the hint is more than evident. It is impossible that their errors and the Orthodox teachings of the church should be true at the same time. This is why prompt action should be enforced with respect to the cancellation of their right to hold ecclesiastical meetings, as well as to the annulling of their permission to disseminate their teachings. Gregory is convinced that the Apollinarians’ dogmatic errors are actually a great evil that must be corrected, so he urges Nectarius to



act accordingly using his authority as bishop of Constantinople. It is evident that Gregory would like Nectarius to take action immediately, but he also realizes the implementation of such actions against the Apollinarians could cause unrest in some higher quarters beyond the realm of the churches and into that of imperial politics. Gregory seems to be painfully aware that it may be the case that the bishop himself could not act on his own against the Apollinarians, so he advises him to seek the emperor's help.<sup>45</sup> It must be underlined here that Gregory's suggestion that Nectarius should ask for the emperor's help is not put bluntly. What he does in fact is advise Nectarius to "teach" the emperor<sup>46</sup> that there is no profitable end to the permission given to the Apollinarians to disseminate their doctrines and hold their meetings.<sup>47</sup>

At this point—which brings us to the eighth characteristic of traditional theology—Gregory reaches a very delicate issue, namely, that of freedom of speech and its relationship with faith.<sup>48</sup> Is freedom of speech more important than the faith of the church?<sup>49</sup> To Gregory—as well as to traditional theology in general—the answer is clear and it is negative. Thus, in traditional theology there is nothing more important than the soundness of the church's faith because the church's faith is in fact the faith of each Christian believer. In addition to this, the faith of each Christian believer reflects his or her spirituality, which in the true church is the spirituality of Christ. Although he does not elaborate on this, it seems that for Gregory freedom of speech is a reality that does not apply to the church in the sense the world understands it. This is because the church is not free to say whatever she wants, and this is also true for Christians. We are not allowed, we are not free to say everything we want in churches. What we must say in churches is exclusively the words of the Gospel, which present Christ in the correct, biblical way. Going to church is definitely not compulsory, but confessing Christ in full accordance with his image as pictured in the Bible is. This is why traditional theology will always value the correct preaching of Christ for the edification of the believers' faith over the more or less politically correct freedom of speech.

This is the reason why, in the fourth century, Gregory insists that the Apollinarians had no right to teach in churches, because their doctrines about Christ were wrong. What they teach in churches is dogmatically erroneous and spiritually defective, so their tenets do nothing but cause suffering to the church as well as to individual Christians. This is why Gregory has no qualms of conscience when he advises Nectarius and, through him, the emperor himself, that

firm action against the Apollinarians means in fact putting an end to the suffering of the church.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Gregory seems convinced that the cancellation of the Apollinarians' right to teach and hold meetings is nothing but the result of well-informed Christian spirituality, which cannot be other than that of Christ seen as sovereign God over the entire creation—a confession that traditional theology has resolutely professed ever since.

## CHAPTER 2



# TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN EARLY MODERNITY

JOHN CALVIN AND ECCLESIASTICAL  
DISCIPLINE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

### INTRODUCTION

Although the Protestant Reformation sought to turn to the church of antiquity as the desired ecclesiological and theological model for the newly established Protestant communities, the vital issues of patristic theology as reflected in Gregory Nazianzen and his Christological focus were no longer a problem in the sixteenth century. The doctrine of God as Trinity and the key aspects of Jesus Christ's hypostatic union had been long established despite the constant claims of antitrinitarians and unitarians embodied, for instance, by the works of Michael Servetus. The very problem that bothered the Reformation was not Christology but rather ecclesiology. Everyone knew who Jesus Christ was, but not everybody was convinced about how he should be followed. The question of following Christ by attending the ancient Catholic church or by joining the new Protestant communities proved to be an issue needing a great deal of theological reflection. In addition to this, it was not enough to join either of the two main denominations; what really counted was how believers ought to behave in the churches they eventually decided to attend. This is why the doctrine of the church and the teaching of ecclesiastical discipline became a key aspect of Protestant theology in the sixteenth century and, at the same time, another classical example of traditional Christianity. It should be pointed out that Jean Calvin

(1509–64) presents ecclesiastical discipline as a necessity for the life of the church, as well as a feature of normality for all believers. Discipline should be applied on a regular basis for the benefit of believers in order to counter the natural human tendency to oppose correction. At the same time, discipline is presented as closely interwoven with doctrine, which is the essence of church order. The church must have a right state, which is defined according to the correct preaching of doctrine and is enabled by the application of discipline. Admonition and even excommunication are part of the structure of ecclesiastical discipline, but the most important aspect of discipline is its doctrinal core. Maintaining church discipline is not primarily a matter of rebuking sinful believers but rather of disseminating the right kind of doctrine in the church. Doctrine is therefore important for discipline not because it encapsulates a set of biblical truths but because it points to Christ as the Lord of the church as well as of all believers. Private and public discipline must be applied in accordance with the nature of the sins committed, which are essentially private and public, with the ultimate goal of restoring the life of the sinful so they follow Christ's teaching as exposed in Scripture.

### DISCIPLINE AND ITS MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

A quick glance at Calvin's presentation of ecclesiastical discipline reveals the fact that order in the church is a requirement for the normality of spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> As order is a prerequisite of what our spiritual existence should be, it follows that the means whereby order is preserved become equally necessary.<sup>2</sup> It is now that Calvin's discussion of church discipline comes at issue with one of its primary characteristics, namely, that its compulsoriness is a reality that goes unquestioned. In other words, church discipline is absolutely compulsory because it is the very core of ecclesiastical life. The life of the church goes on as it unfolds through the individual lives of its members, but it is because of these very lives of believers that the enforcement as well as the application of church discipline becomes so important.<sup>3</sup> So the first characteristic of ecclesiastical discipline is its compulsory character.<sup>4</sup> Church discipline is a must, and there is no doubt about it should we want the church to lead a normal life from the standpoint of its spiritual quality.<sup>5</sup> It follows that every member of the church must know that discipline is a constant feature of the life of the church, which also means that it must become an equally constant characteristic of the member's own life.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, the first feature of traditional theology as presented in Calvin's thought is revealed. Thus, traditional theology is always alert when the idea of discipline and especially the necessity of its application are seen as abnormalities or even absurdities. Contemporary society, for instance, teaches us that we can do whatever we want for as long as we feel we are doing the right thing, so any limitations of our actions based on our own experience can only produce irritability and suspicion. Today's theology is no longer based on Scripture, as it was in Calvin's case, but on what we feel and experience; it is no wonder discipline is not an enjoyable issue. Calvin's doctrine—a true, genuine sample of traditional theology—teaches us that we need to come to terms with the normality of the church's life, which includes the idea of discipline. For traditional theology, a church without discipline is abnormal and absurd because it meets all sorts of criteria but it functions far from properly.

Having briefly presented the necessity of church discipline for the normality of ecclesiastical life, Calvin introduces a second feature of church discipline. Church discipline is indeed compulsory, but its compulsoriness must be applied to all the members of the church. At this point, Calvin explains how he sees the church from the perspective of its inner constitution with reference to its members. Within the church, there are two main categories of members: first, the clergy,<sup>7</sup> and second, the people.<sup>8</sup> Calvin realizes almost instantly that the word "clergy" may cause unease or even trouble for some more delicate ears; this is why he underlines that the word "clergy" is used only to highlight a point. Thus, although the word "clergy" itself is improper, he nevertheless decided to use it in order to point to those members of the church who have a church office and perform a public church ministry. The differentiation between clergy and laity in Calvin is not given by the spiritual nature of Christian ministry, because all Christians must work for the Gospel. It is, however, necessary to introduce two distinct categories of ministry, one of the clergy and one of the laity, especially due to the public nature of the former while the latter tends to be more restricted to one's individuality. This is why Calvin speaks of the clergy and the laity as different with respect to the public nature of the work of the clergy, and—given this distinction—a differentiation should also be introduced with reference to the types of ecclesiastical discipline.<sup>9</sup>

This presents us with the third characteristic of church discipline. After pointedly describing ecclesiastical discipline as, first, compulsory for the life of the church and, second, necessary for all members of the church, Calvin brings forward the third aspect of discipline,

which pictures discipline as having a dual specificity. This means that, while compulsory for the church in its general membership and necessary for every individual believer, ecclesiastical discipline must be applied specifically to clergy and laity. In other words, church discipline should be exercised not only individually with reference to all the members of the church as individual persons but also specifically when it comes to the restoration of a certain member of the clergy. Calvin is convinced that the dichotomy of church discipline, which says there is a common discipline for all believers and a peculiar discipline for the clergy, is nothing but a sign of normality, even with reference to the world. Thus, he explains that discipline cannot be understood without comprehending the very nature of society. It is crucial to see that society in general—but also smaller components of society, such as the family—functions within a certain degree of normality, which Calvin describes by means of the notion of “right state.”<sup>10</sup> The right state, however, can be easily disturbed so the balance of society or family is no longer there to make sure that the preservation of normality remains the norm for the regular life of society or family. When that happens and the right state is endangered, the need for discipline becomes more than merely evident. It is equally evident that Calvin makes a clear comparison between the family and the church; the church is presented as a family because if the right state of the family is restored by discipline, the same must happen in the church as embodiment of a better order. The family needs order and so does the church as both represent different degrees of order. The church, though, is, for Calvin, the encapsulation of the highest degree of order, so the necessity that discipline be enforced and applied within it becomes an obvious reality.<sup>11</sup>

This is actually the second characteristic of traditional theology as disclosed by Calvin’s teaching. While it acknowledges the necessity of church discipline, traditional theology does not stop here. Mere acknowledgment is nothing without the practical implementation of ecclesiastical discipline, so traditional theology not only recognizes the necessity of church discipline but also acts toward its application in the daily life of the church. Today’s church should come to terms with the reality of its own existence, which should be different from that of unchurched society. We tend no longer to see the church as separated from the world though still living in the world. The norm of today’s people is anything but God, so the only other possibility is to guide one’s life according to our human precepts. Contemporary society is highly experiential in the sense that human experience sets the ultimate standard for conduct, so anything that is not endorsed

by human experience or anything that does not follow the urges of human experience should be dismissed as old and ineffective. This is why the frontier between the church and society gets increasingly blurred, so that there is no longer an acute awareness of what the church really is as compared to society or the world. The principles of the world invade the church, while the church succumbs to them without even trying to provide the feeblest opposition. While both society and the church should be guided by order—and in this they look similar—traditional theology teaches that the church is nevertheless different because, even as compared to society, it embodies a degree of order that is higher than what society has to offer. In traditional theology, a minimum degree of order is absolutely necessary in everything—and society makes no exception to this rule—so this is an extra reason for the church to strengthen its own life with the order provided by discipline.

### DISCIPLINE AND THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

Calvin knows for a fact that his defense of church discipline as necessary as well as beneficial for the life of the Christian community comes from nature, so the presentation of the “right state” of the church based on the argument of order needs to be supplemented by an explanation that also provides us with spiritual insight.<sup>12</sup> The interweaving between natural and spiritual elements in presenting ecclesiastical discipline is a *sine qua non* because nature itself can only provide limited arguments. Calvin is aware that some people manifest aversion toward discipline, so the natural explanation of why discipline is necessary will not appeal to them. Consequently, the spiritual reasoning behind supporting church discipline must go beyond what is naturally logical or beneficial into what is spiritually compulsory. In other words, church discipline cannot be properly explained without reference to the teachings of the church, in fact the very teaching or doctrine of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, which is actually his Gospel.<sup>13</sup>

This is where the third feature of traditional theology as taught by Calvin is seen plainly because, in traditional theology, ecclesiastical discipline is nothing without doctrine. Furthermore, it has no value whatsoever unless supported by the teachings of Jesus Christ. Our biggest problem today is the waning of Christ’s importance both in the church and in the lives of ordinary believers. Christ is no longer seen as the Lord of the church, the risen and living God who constantly supports the church as it goes through history. Christ

is present as a mere man, who is dead, and only his teachings bear a certain degree of relevance for the church, but they can also be interpreted in such a way that they fit our contemporary expectations. The immediate consequence is that discipline, which is based on and explained by doctrine, is not worth applying any longer. On the other hand, Calvin's teaching—and traditional theology for that matter—tell us to stick to the purity of doctrine as preached by Jesus Christ, the only source of benefit for all believers.

By making reference to Christ in connection with ecclesiastical discipline, Calvin puts together Christology and ecclesiology in his attempt to draft the spiritual aspects of his perspective on church discipline. The normality of the church or, more exactly, the normality of the everyday life of the church is totally dependent on Christ and especially on the doctrine of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Calvin shows no signs of doubt when he writes that the doctrine of Christ is the very life of the church, which means that the morrow of the church's life is in fact Christ himself.<sup>15</sup> There is no church without Christ, and there is no life of the church without the teaching of Christ. The church cannot exist apart from Christ, and it is equally true that the vitality of the church has nothing to do with teachings that exclude Christ. A healthy church is always closely tied to Christ and his teaching, as Calvin poignantly shows in his presentation of church discipline. Having established that the very life of the church has to do with the doctrine of Christ, Calvin moves forward in making it clear that the discipline of the church is just as important as the doctrine of Christ because it provides the church with the very means to support its life, which is Christian life in general.<sup>16</sup> This is why he writes that while the teaching of Christ is the life of the church, ecclesiastical discipline is the power of the church or the reality whereby the church can find the power to exist.<sup>17</sup> Calvin explains why ecclesiastical discipline supports the life of the church by saying that the various members of the church, or ordinary believers, can stay together in the body of the church and can also function properly as part of the same organism due to the fact that church discipline can hold them together. The lack of ecclesiastical discipline leads to the disintegration of the church, and Calvin knows this a tough lesson to learn. He is aware that opposition to the enforcement or reinstatement of ecclesiastical discipline is sadly a reality within the church;<sup>18</sup> this is why he warns that actions such as these can only lead to what he calls the total destruction of the church.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin's underlining of the person of Christ in connection with the doctrine of ecclesiastical discipline shows the fourth characteristic of



traditional theology, namely, the compulsory link between discipline and Christ. No one can correctly apply church discipline in the life of the Christian community without reference to Christ, to his person, work, and teachings; any attempt to have a disciplined church will be just another human endeavor to enforce order in a community that is not merely human but also divine. Traditional theology, however, is convinced that Christ is the head of the church, so the church must follow his rule no matter what. This is why, when problems occur, the solution should come from the head, not from those who caused the problems. It is only logical—let alone that it is also spiritual—to act in accordance with the teachings of Christ, the head of the church, whenever an attempt is made for the application of discipline within the church. So in traditional theology, discipline comes from “above,” namely, from the teachings of Christ, and its purpose is to help believers always keep their eyes on Christ.

Calvin seems to have lived in a society that bore a great resemblance to ours. Church discipline has never been eagerly accepted, let alone applied, because it works against the most fundamental instincts of the human nature. Man does not like to be rebuked or corrected, but it is exactly rebuke and correction that ecclesiastical discipline is meant to instill within the members of the *ecclesia*. What we have to understand from Calvin’s doctrine—and this is the fifth characteristic of traditional theology according to his works—is that a church without discipline is a church without life, which is on the path to disintegration. At the same time, for traditional theology opposition to discipline is a permanent attitude in and outside the church, so the application of discipline has never been, is not, and shall never be an easy task.

It is at this point that the necessity of ecclesiastical discipline acquires a new facet. Discipline is a must in the church because the church is no man’s land, so no matter what we say or do we do not own the church in any way. The church is not our property—let alone our private property—so the way we should behave in the church should be dictated by regulations that are not our own. Believers may not behave in churches as they please because no one is allowed to do in the church whatever he or she wants. In the church we must do only what we are required to do. Should anyone have any sort of doubts concerning what should be done in the church, Calvin plainly states that it is the preaching of the Gospel that must occupy the believers’ minds and actions.<sup>20</sup> The preaching of the Gospel, however, cannot be done smoothly because believers are human and humanity means trouble. It is for this reason that

Calvin adds a compact list of actions that should accompany the preaching of the Gospel.<sup>21</sup> The list includes private admonition and correction as methods devised to maintain doctrine.<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to notice here that, in Calvin, private admonition and correction are not meant to preserve church discipline but church doctrine. This is quite illuminating because it reveals Calvin's perspective on the relationship between doctrine and discipline, namely, that discipline is maintained provided doctrine is kept pure. In other words, if doctrine is preserved correctly, then the church will be characterized by discipline; if doctrine is twisted, it is clear that disaster shall eventually strike the church. To be sure, if we want to have discipline in the church, some actions must be taken extremely seriously: first, preach the Gospel correctly, then give private admonition and correction with view to the preservation of correct doctrine. When these actions become a reality in the daily life of the church, discipline should not be counted among the problems of the church.<sup>23</sup>

If we have second thoughts about the necessity of discipline or we fear what might happen if and when we enforce it, we should probably be concerned with a totally different aspect, namely, the necessity to preach the Gospel correctly, which is the sixth feature of traditional theology based on Calvin's teaching. The first step toward discipline is surprisingly not rebuke or correction, but the preaching of the Gospel. The Gospel, however, must be preached correctly, and in today's world this presents us with the challenge to preach the Gospel in such a way that it becomes an ongoing preoccupation for all believers. When people in the church do anything but listen to the Gospel, then we have a case that requires church discipline. Therefore, according to traditional theology, the very first step toward the application of discipline is making sure that the Gospel is properly preached before admonition and correction are practically administered to believers.

Calvin seems utterly convinced that the key to ecclesiastical discipline is correct doctrine because private admonition and correction must be performed lest doctrine become lethargic. Lethargic doctrine spells trouble and dissipates order, so we must keep the doctrine full of life in order to have a church that lives in accordance with spiritual discipline. It is clear therefore that, in Calvin, the connection between doctrine and discipline is unbreakable, but this relationship becomes even clearer when he points out that discipline is a way to stop those who fight against the doctrine of Christ.<sup>24</sup> So it works both ways: from doctrine to discipline, in the sense that the preaching of correct doctrine should lead to discipline, but also

from discipline to doctrine, if the preaching of correct doctrine is jeopardized in the church. In case the latter situation unfolds, Calvin finds a threefold function of church discipline: first, discipline is a means to stop false doctrine;<sup>25</sup> second, discipline is a method to stop indifference;<sup>26</sup> and third, discipline is a way to stop disobedience.<sup>27</sup> Calvin's threefold function of ecclesiastical discipline actually discloses three types of church members: first, those who fight against the correct preaching of the Gospel; second, those who are totally indifferent when it comes to the correctness of the preaching of the Gospel; and third, those who committed grave sins because of their dismissal of the correct preaching of the Gospel. In each case, however, doctrine is interwoven with discipline, and there is no way to separate the two realities of the church's daily life.<sup>28</sup>

### DISCIPLINE AND THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The life of the church is the life of its members; to be more precise, it is the sum of the individual lives of all believers. Calvin does not lose sight of the fact that believers are human beings and human beings need to be managed. Church discipline presents itself as a necessity especially because believers are human beings in need of careful management. Calvin resorts to the situation of his own days when he notices that the church then experienced serious plight concerning the way people behaved and led their lives as part of the ecclesiastical body. Thus, Calvin points out that the church is at the brink of disaster, and this situation can be easily noticed because people management is deficient. Although he does not offer a detailed presentation of what he means by people management, Calvin nevertheless highlights two aspects that should characterize the life of the church but that were absent from the church of his time, as he himself notes. According to Calvin, people management in the church is faulty when care—meaning pastoral care<sup>29</sup>—and methodology—more likely a reference to the application of pastoral care<sup>30</sup>—seem to be among the aspects that no longer feature in the normality of the church's life. In other words, when pastoral care and the practice thereof are not part of the church's daily existence, the church finds itself in a serious situation that requires immediate action for a proper remedy. It is clear for Calvin that pastoral care and the application of pastoral care are closely connected to sound doctrine, and it is equally significant to understand—based on his previous explanation—that sound doctrine leads to pastoral care as well as to its application in the church. Likewise, when doctrine is

no longer preached in a sound manner, the immediate consequence is the disparagement of pastoral care, which is no longer applied in the church, with consequences that throw the church into a whirl of problems requiring the application of ecclesiastical discipline. When pastoral care and its application in the church are lacking in the church's life, it indicates doctrine is also damaged, so the situation of the church is characterized by the *necessity* that discipline be enforced. Even though Calvin does not use this wording, it can be said that such a situation in the church is conspicuous because "necessity itself cries aloud that there is need of a remedy."<sup>31</sup>

The remedy envisioned by Calvin is ecclesiastical discipline and its application in the church. To be sure, discipline and its application in the church are totally tied to pastoral care and its application in the church. This means that the very essence of pastoral care is ecclesiastical discipline, while the application of pastoral care cannot be done without the application of ecclesiastical discipline. Resuming the distinction between clergy and laity, it can be argued based on Calvin's position so far that clergy can show they are concerned about the spiritual welfare of the laity only when they manifest and apply pastoral care. This inevitably means that the clergy's interest in laity can never exclude ecclesiastical discipline and its application in the church.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the constant spiritual as well as ecclesiastical relationship between the ministers of the church and the body of believers will always be characterized by discipline and its application. Consequently, the logical conclusion—which Calvin does not explicitly draw—is that the normality of the church's life presents the constant characteristic of ecclesiastical discipline. Even if this conclusion is not so clear in Calvin, what is clear indeed has to do with the fact that ecclesiastical discipline needs to be applied in the church. With respect to this issue, Calvin identifies two ways of applying church discipline, which are dependent on the two types of sins that afflict church members. Regardless of the specific manifestation of particular sins, the typology of sins in Calvin is dichotomic. Thus, there are private or secret sins<sup>33</sup> and public or open sins.<sup>34</sup> In plain language, believers can commit sins known only to themselves, or they can commit sins that are known to other people as well.<sup>35</sup>

It is vital to notice here—and this is the seventh feature of traditional theology—that Calvin does not seem surprised at all by the presence of sin among believers in the church. He does not lament the fact that believers sin; he knows that sin is a permanent reality in the believer's life so there is no point in weeping over something inherently part of human nature. What he does criticize in fact—and

traditional theology should be doing this constantly—is the lack of counteraction in dealing with sin, or the nonexistent desire to fight against sin.<sup>36</sup> Sin may well be a reality in the church—and this is unfortunately an unpleasant sign of ecclesiastical normality—but the lack of discipline aimed at correcting or restricting sin in the believers' lives should not be a constant reality in the church. In other words, traditional theology teaches us that the reality of sin can and should be accepted in the church—very much like our own human nature, which nurtures sin—but the lack of disciplinary actions taken against sin must never be accepted in the church. So sin is there in every believer and this is why discipline must also be present in the church. The reality of sin points to the reality of discipline or, to use Calvin's reasoning, the fact that sin exists shows the necessity for discipline.<sup>37</sup> According to sound traditional theology, the more we realize sin is a constant trouble in the church, the more we have to understand that church discipline is not an option but a compulsory action that must be applied daily. Believers commit sins every day, and this is the very reason why ecclesiastical discipline must also be a daily preoccupation as part of church ministry.<sup>38</sup>

## DISCIPLINE AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE CHURCH

When it comes to the application of church discipline, Calvin differentiates between private discipline, or private admonition,<sup>39</sup> as he calls it, and public discipline, or solemn correction,<sup>40</sup> as he puts it. These two kinds of discipline should be enforced in the church because of the dichotomy of sin's manifestation, which is private, public, or both. Private sins should be dealt with privately and public sins should be corrected publicly. It should be noted here that both private and public discipline must be understood as being the duty of every single Christian believer. Calvin is convinced that all believers must exercise their duty to apply ecclesiastical discipline, both private and public, for the welfare of the church in general as well as the profit of individual Christians. The application of discipline, however, is not an easy job, as Calvin also realizes. This is why he writes that believers "must study" how to admonish their brothers and sisters.<sup>41</sup> So the application of discipline requires discipline, in the sense that it takes quite some time before believers learn how to put discipline into practice. Having explained that the practice of church discipline is the result of diligent study and should be applied indiscriminately by all believers to all believers, Calvin proceeds with a brief description of each kind of discipline.<sup>42</sup>

This is crucially important because our society dislikes the idea of discipline to such a degree that the mere idea of subjecting someone to the “coercion” of discipline seems preposterous, let alone dedicating a certain amount of time to studying how to apply discipline. Reversing this conviction—so dear to contemporary society—is a discipline in itself, but the church has a lot to learn from it. For instance, we must understand that not only does discipline take time, but also learning how to apply it requires a huge chunk of our time resources. This is because discipline involves dealing with people, and dealing with people is anything but easy. Consequently, we must learn what discipline is and how it should be applied according to the typology of sins committed. Calvin is very supportive in this respect because he details the two kinds of discipline and the way they should be put into practice.

Private discipline, which is performed when the sins committed by believers were done without reaching public awareness, requires first of all a high degree of vigilance.<sup>43</sup> All believers must train themselves to be watchful over the spiritual welfare of their brothers and sisters, but the special duty of administering ecclesiastical discipline rests with the ministers of the church, with pastors and presbyters.<sup>44</sup> At this point, Calvin builds on one of his previous arguments, which says that doctrine and discipline are closely connected. As doctrine cannot exist without discipline and vice versa, the duty of the minister is also dichotomic. Thus, in addition to preaching the word of God and disseminating the right doctrine in the church, the minister must also carefully and watchfully apply discipline to all those who deserve it. In order to prove his point, Calvin resorts to Scripture and especially to Acts 20:20, 26, and 27. Although these verses do not refer specifically to the application of church discipline, they nevertheless mention Paul’s active preaching of the Gospel for the benefit of all believers, as well as the fact that he taught them both publicly and from house to house, or privately. The verses also show that Paul’s preaching discloses God’s entire will or plan and, in doing so, he is innocent “of the blood of all men”; in other words, preaching the word of God in its fullness preserves ministers—and all Christians for that matter—from being guilty when it comes to the sins committed by others. It is clear that, in Calvin, preaching and teaching include ecclesiastical discipline and its application; this is why, in his theology, the duty of the minister resides not only in preaching and teaching but also in applying discipline whenever that is required. This proves to be highly important for Calvin because what is at stake here is not only the state of the believer

who committed a certain sin but also the reality of the Gospel itself. Calvin is convinced that the Gospel is truly important because it has power and authority. Moreover, the power and authority of the Gospel do not and should not manifest themselves only through preaching and teaching but also through the application of discipline every single time that it is necessary.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the Gospel has power and authority not only in presenting true doctrine but also in correcting the deviation from true doctrine.<sup>46</sup>

Public discipline is not only the necessary measure to be taken against public sins but also the consequence of rejecting private discipline.<sup>47</sup> Calvin uses Scripture again to show that private discipline can turn into public discipline when private admonition is shunned. The reasons for such an option are irrelevant; what matters is the fact that the rebuked believer persists in his fault, which is a sign of disobedience.<sup>48</sup> Thus, based on Matthew 18:15 and 17, Calvin says that what was initially intended as private discipline must become less private. When private discipline no longer works, public discipline must be applied in four distinct stages, if the believer does not give up his resentful attitude. Thus, when private discipline is not enough, the four steps to be taken as part of public discipline stipulate that admonition is performed first before witnesses; second, before the elders or presbyters; third, before the church itself; and fourth, the believer is excluded from the fellowship of the church and he is consequently no longer considered a believer. After he carefully explains what should happen when private discipline turns into public discipline because individual admonition as a result of a private sin did not work, Calvin offers a brief presentation of public discipline as applied for public sins. He turns again to the text of Scripture and he uses two distinct passages: Galatians 2:14 and 1 Timothy 5:20. The first text is used to show what the apostle means by public sin, while the second displays the manner of as well as the reasons for public discipline. Thus, when Peter publicly committed the sin of hypocrisy by siding with Jews to the detriment of Gentiles, Paul corrected Peter's sinful attitude by rebuking him in public, which is the context of the sin itself. Public discipline must be administered in order that all believers should be made aware that sin is not to be taken lightly. The Gospel must be taken seriously not only as teaching but also as living, so any deviation from the right teaching, living, or both as exposed in the Gospel must be corrected privately, publicly, or both, in accordance with the nature of the sin that triggered ecclesiastical discipline. Discipline, however, regardless of whether it is private or public, should not be administered exclusively for the spiritual

welfare of the sinful believer but also because it is commanded by Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church.<sup>49</sup> Calvin does not insist on this aspect here, but his doctrine of ecclesiastical discipline cannot be separated from his Christology, which pictures the reality of Christ's presence in the church as permanently indwelling. Christ himself is present in the church, and this is primarily why discipline must be enforced—as a sign of our obedience to the teachings of his Gospel.<sup>50</sup>

Calvin's lesson about discipline is not a course on how to implement ecclesiastical coercion in order to annoy believers at all costs; it is rather an invitation to know Jesus Christ and his church, which is also the essence of traditional theology as well as its eighth characteristic as revealed by Calvin's thought. In traditional theology, discipline is not needed because we have to comply with certain doctrines; discipline is needed because it is the only way to teach us who we really are and how we should behave in and outside the church. Church discipline teaches us that our lives must be sincere, not because certain dogmas tell us so, but because Christ tells us so. We need to follow Christ no matter what, and whenever this attitude gets off the right track discipline is available for correction. This is why church discipline is not something that should be seen as producing opposition to Christ but as a reality that brings us closer to him. But, as traditional theology teaches us, this can happen only in the church, not beyond its borders, which also teaches us that the church is not the world, so the church must not conform itself to the standards of the world. Christianity, Christian spirituality, and Christian life are not compulsory for the world, but neither are the standards of the world for the church. So, if discipline is necessary for Christian life—and it is according to traditional theology—then the world has nothing to say about it. It is only Christ who has anything to say about his church and its discipline, but he has already said what he had to say in Scripture, which is persistently used by Calvin to draft his theology of ecclesiastical discipline.