

Article

Word, Sacrament, and the Public Life of Christians: Calvin's Worship-Formed Ethics in *Institutes* IV

Shinhyung Seong 

Baird College of General Education, Soongsil University, Seoul 06978, Republic of Korea; seongshil@ssu.ac.kr

Abstract

This article argues that John Calvin's account of the church in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV is best read through the formative logic of worship. Calvin famously identifies preaching the Word and administering the sacraments as the marks of the visible church. Rather than regarding these marks merely as identifiers, this study interprets them as worship practices that shape Christian life "in-between" church and society. First, the preached Word is not simply received as information but functions as the medium through which faith is generated and sustained, forming a community tasked to bear truth publicly. Second, the sacraments operate as embodied theology: baptism initiates believers into ecclesial belonging through cleansing, renewal, and confession, while the Lord's Supper repeatedly schools the church in remembrance, thanksgiving, unity, and mutual love. Finally, by situating the Word and sacrament within the church's maternal nurture and the ministry of reconciliation, the article shows how worship extends beyond the sanctuary, cultivating conscience and communal practices oriented toward public peace and responsibility. In Calvin's Reformation vision, worship is thus the hinge that links ecclesiology to social ethics without collapsing the distinction between the church and civil society.

Keywords: John Calvin; *Institute of the Christian Religion*; worship; preaching; sacraments; ecclesiology; reformation; social ethics

1. Introduction

A persistent tension within many modern Christian communities is the apparent division between "spiritual life" and "earthly life." Churches may affirm the importance of moral action and social responsibility, yet in practice they can drift toward a functional dualism: salvation and piety are treated as the church's central concern, while public life—work, politics, justice, and social bonds—is regarded as secondary, morally optional, or even spiritually suspect. The result is an uneasy Christian existence in which faith is privatized and "heavenly" hope is detached from the concrete responsibilities of life among neighbors.

This article revisits that tension through John Calvin's ecclesiology in Book IV of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin serves as a strategic interlocutor for two reasons. First, his vision emerges directly from the Reformation's struggle over worship, in which questions about the church's identity were inseparable from those about preaching, sacramental practice, and liturgical reform. Second, Calvin offers a robust account of the visible church that is neither merely institutional nor merely invisible. He treats the church as a community in history that God gathers, nourishes, and guides through identifiable practices—above all, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments



Academic Editor: Hwarang Moon

Received: 27 January 2026

Revised: 18 February 2026

Accepted: 20 February 2026

Published: 23 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

(Eire 1986, pp. 3–4). These “marks” of the church provide a concrete way to examine how worship functions as a bridge between ecclesial life and public existence.

The central claim of this study is that Calvin’s marks are best interpreted as formative worship practices rather than as mere identifiers. Preaching and sacrament, on this reading, do not simply label the church; they shape Christians. Through the preached Word, believers are constituted as a hearing community that receives faith, endures in truth, and learns obedience as a response to God’s address (Calvin 1960, IV.1.5, p. 1018). Through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, believers are incorporated and sustained in an embodied communal identity marked by repentance, renewal, memory, gratitude, unity, and mutual love—virtues with unavoidable social implications (Calvin 1960, IV.15 and VI.17). In this way, Calvin’s worship theology provides an account of the Christian life that is “in-between” church and society: Christians belong to the ecclesial community as a distinct people, yet worship trains them for responsibility within broader social relations rather than for withdrawal.

Three questions guide the argument. First, how does Calvin understand the preached Word as a constitutive practice of the visible church, and what kind of communal life does it generate? Second, how do the sacraments function as “embodied theology” that forms ethical dispositions and communal bonds? Third, how does this worship formation illuminate Calvin’s understanding of public life—especially the Christian duty of peaceable social participation and the limits of civil obedience—without reducing the church to a political program or reducing public responsibility to a secondary concern (Witte 2007, p. 4).

Methodologically, the article offers a close reading of *Institutes* IV, using Calvin’s own descriptions of the marks of the church, the church’s maternal nurture, and the ministry of reconciliation as the primary textual backbone. Secondary scholarship on Calvin’s preaching, sacramental theology, and Reformation worship provides historical and interpretive framing, particularly to show that Calvin’s reforms were oriented toward aligning ecclesial practice with evangelical theology. The argument proceeds by (i) clarifying why the marks matter as the visible church’s “face,” (ii) interpreting the preached Word as formative worship practice, (iii) interpreting baptism and the Lord’s Supper as embodied training in communal identity and love, and (iv) drawing concise implications for public life in terms of bounded obedience and responsibility among neighbors.

While extensive scholarship has explored Calvin’s social ethics through his exposition of the Decalogue or his treatises on civil government (Witte 2007, p. 243), fewer studies have attended to the liturgical foundations of his ethics. This article departs from approaches that treat Calvin’s ecclesiology and social ethics as separate domains. Instead, it argues that for Calvin, the ‘school of God’ is primarily found in the worshiping assembly. By analyzing the marks of the church as formative practices, this study demonstrates that Calvin’s vision of public responsibility is not merely a theological deduction but a habituated disposition cultivated through the ordinary means of grace.

Several prominent interpretations of Calvin’s ecclesiology have regarded the marks of the church primarily as boundary-defining criteria within confessional and polemical contexts. Alister McGrath (2012) and Willem van’t Spijker (2009), for example, emphasize the identificatory and institutional functions of the marks, particularly in distinguishing the true church from corrupt forms. These perspectives highlight the doctrinal precision and anti-Roman polemical objectives of Calvin’s formulation. In contrast, recent scholarship has emphasized the central role of worship in Calvin’s reforming vision. Bryan Spinks (2006)’s research on Reformation liturgy and Randall Zachman (2009)’s analysis of the visual and communal dimensions of Calvin’s theology demonstrate that ecclesiology is closely connected to enacted practice. Building on these developments, this article contends that Calvin’s marks of the church should be understood not only as indicators of ecclesial

authenticity but also as worship practices that form a community for life both within and beyond the sanctuary.

In the sixteenth-century Reformation, worship was not a peripheral topic reserved for matters of style or esthetics. It was a primary site where theological commitments were publicly enacted and contested—especially around the authority of Scripture in preaching, the meaning and number of sacraments, and the legitimacy of inherited rites. Reformers did not merely propose new doctrinal formulations; they sought to reconfigure the church’s ordinary practices in order to align ecclesial life with evangelical claims about grace, faith, and Christ’s mediating work. In that context, disputes about “the church” were inseparable from disputes about the practices by which the church becomes visible, is sustained, and is recognized as faithful.

This background helps explain why Calvin’s discussion of the marks of the church is more than a set of abstract ecclesiological criteria. Calvin presents preaching and the sacrament as ordinary, repeatable practices through which God addresses and nourishes believers, forming them into a community whose life can be publicly identified as church (Calvin 1960, IV.1.10, p. 1024). The “practical” orientation of these marks also intersects with the Reformation’s culture of persuasion, in which proclamation, catechesis, and recurring communal rites were central to shaping convictions and sustaining reform in contested social settings (Pettegree 2005, pp. 5–7). To read Calvin’s marks in this horizon is therefore to treat worship as a formative hinge—linking theology to embodied practice and ecclesial identity to social existence—without collapsing the church into a political program or relegating public responsibility to an optional add-on.

By framing Calvin’s ecclesiology around worship as formation, this article aims to contribute to ongoing discussions of Reformation worship as both theology and practice. The Reformation did not merely revise doctrinal statements; it contested and reconstructed the public practices by which Christian communities understood themselves and lived among others. Calvin’s marks of the church offer a focused lens into that dynamic: worship is not an escape from the world but a training ground for life within it.

2. Why the Marks Matter: The Visible Church’s Face

Calvin’s account of the church in *Institutes* IV is often read as a set of ecclesiological propositions: definitions of the church, lists of its attributes, and boundaries against error. Yet Calvin’s language repeatedly signals that ecclesiology is inseparable from practice—specifically, from worship as the enacted life of the visible church. When Calvin identifies the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments as the “marks” of the church, he is not merely offering a classificatory tool for theologians. He is describing the concrete public “face” by which the church is recognizable in history and through which Christians are formed into a particular kind of people (Calvin 1960, IV.1.9, pp. 1023–24).

This emphasis on visibility matters in a Reformation context where disputes over the church were also disputes over worship—what counts as faithful proclamation, what counts as a rightly ordered sacramental life, and how liturgical reform relates to the church’s identity and authority (Eire 1986, pp. 228–32). Calvin’s marks function, on one level, polemically: they distinguish the church from communities that either corrupt the gospel in preaching or empty the sacraments of their evangelical purpose. But the marks also serve a positive, pedagogical function: they indicate where and how God ordinarily nourishes faith and shapes communal life. Calvin’s ecclesiology, therefore, cannot be reduced to institutional description; it is a theology of the church’s worship practices as divine instruments of formation (Eire 1986, pp. 197–211).

Describing the marks as the church’s “face” captures two interconnected claims. First, the church is not primarily known by hidden spiritual qualities that can never be seen, nor

by sociological success, nor by political power. The visible church becomes visible through acts: the Word is preached and heard; the sacraments are administered and received. These practices are observable, communal, and repeatable. They constitute the church's public presence as church rather than as a generic religious gathering (Calvin 1960, IV.1.9, pp. 1023–24). Second, the “face” metaphor implies relationality and encounter. A face is what one turns toward others; it is how a person is recognized and how a relationship begins. In the same way, the marks are not only internal mechanisms for maintaining piety; they are the outward modalities through which the church stands before God and neighbor, continually receiving the gospel and being reshaped by it (Calvin 1960, IV.1.22, p. 1035).

Reading the marks as formative worship practices also helps clarify why Calvin's ecclesiology yields ethical implications without collapsing the church into society. Worship, for Calvin, is not a retreat from “earthly life.” Rather, it is the site where Christians learn the basic grammar of Christian existence: repentance in light of God's promise, gratitude in response to grace, reconciliation within the body, and truthfulness under the Word. Scholarship on Calvin has emphasized that his reformation of worship was never simply about esthetic preference or ritual minimalism; it was about aligning the church's public practices with the gospel in order to produce a community shaped by that gospel (Gerrish 1993; Parker 1992; Eire 1986). The marks, in other words, are not static badges. They are ongoing acts that train conscience and communal life.

Finally, the marks supply an architecture for the argument of this article. If the preached Word and the sacraments are the church's public “face,” then the question is not only ‘what’ they signify but ‘what they do’. The next sections, therefore, interpret preaching and sacramental practice as the primary means through which Calvin's church “as mother” nurtures believers, sustains a ministry of reconciliation, and orients Christians toward public responsibility while maintaining the church's distinct identity. By foregrounding the marks, we can see how Calvin's “in-between” account of Christian life is best explained not by a vague balancing of sacred and secular but by the formative logic of worship.

3. The Preached Word as Formative Worship Practice

Calvin's identification of the preached Word as a mark of the visible church is best read as both an ecclesiological criterion and a formative worship-practice. In *Institutes* IV, preaching is among the concrete means by which God gathers and sustains the church in history, making the church publicly recognizable while also nurturing believers toward maturity (Calvin 1960, IV.2.2, p. 1042). The Word does not function merely as religious information; it is the ecclesial act through which faith is generated, and conscience is shaped, ordering communal life and orienting Christians toward truthful public witness (Calvin 1960, IV.2.4, pp. 1046–47).

Scholarship on Calvin's preaching further substantiates this formative interpretation. T.H.L. Parker (1992) has demonstrated the pastoral and exegetical dimensions of Calvin's sermons, while Scott Manetsch (2015)'s research on Geneva's pastors emphasizes the communal and disciplinary context in which preaching operated. Collectively, these studies indicate that proclamation in Calvin's Geneva was a regular, communal practice that shaped belief, conduct, and civic disposition, rather than an abstract doctrinal exercise. The preached Word, therefore, contributed to the formation of both individual piety and a shared moral framework within a specific social context.

3.1. Hearing and the Generation of Faith

A central feature of Calvin's account is that faith is mediated through hearing. Echoing Paul's logic in Romans 10:17, Calvin treats “hearing” not as an optional supplement to private devotion but as the ordinary means by which God creates and sustains faith within

the gathered community. This is no minor pedagogical detail; it is a claim about how God addresses the church and how Christians are formed through that address (Calvin 1960, IV.1.5, p. 1018; IV.2.4, p. 1046).

Calvin's emphasis also resists a passive model of reception. Hearing is not mere auditory exposure, and worship is not a weekly pause from "real life." Rather, the proclamation of the Word is an event that trains the church to receive God's promises, to be instructed in repentance, and to be summoned into obedience as a response to divine initiative (Calvin 1960, IV.1.20–21, pp. 1034–35). In this sense, preaching forms dispositions—humility, teachability, and willingness to be corrected—that are simultaneously spiritual and ethical (Calvin 1960, IV.2.4, pp. 1046–47). The preached Word is therefore constitutive of Christian life precisely because it forms the church as a hearing people in a shared practice rather than as isolated spiritual individuals (Pettegree 2005, pp. 3–5).

Crucially, Calvin does not view this formation as a result of human rhetoric alone. He insists that the external preaching of the Word remains fruitless unless accompanied by the 'internal testimony of the Holy Spirit'. It is the Spirit who illuminates the mind and seals the Word upon the heart, transforming auditory reception into active faith. Thus, the formation of the Christian conscience in worship is a pneumatic event; the Spirit uses the preacher's human voice to summon the community into a reality defined by God's truth rather than social consensus.

3.2. *The Word and the Church as a Truth-Bearing Community*

Calvin deepens this argument by linking preaching to the church's vocation with respect to truth. The church can be described as the "pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), not because the church is inherently perfect, but because God has bound the church's public life to the ministry of the Word (Calvin 1960, IV.2.1, p. 1042). The mark of preaching thus implies a communal responsibility: the church is to endure in the truth it receives, guarding the integrity of the gospel as it is proclaimed and heard.

This point is especially salient in the Reformation context, where worship reform was inseparable from disputes about authority and the integrity of the gospel's public communication (Eire 1986, pp. 197–211). To say that the Word is preached is, for Calvin, to say that a community is being gathered and governed by a norm external to itself—one that exposes error, comforts consciences, and prevents the church from dissolving into mere custom or institutional self-interest. Accordingly, preaching functions as a discipline that continually re-centers the church, shaping habits of truthfulness and endurance in a contested public space (Pettegree 2005, pp. 11–15).

3.3. *From Hearing to Public Edification*

Calvin's account of preaching does not stop at individual faith; it aims at communal "edification." The Word builds up the church as a shared life in which believers are taught to repent, forgive, receive correction, and seek reconciliation—practices that are irreducibly social. This is why Calvin can connect preaching to the church's public visibility: the Word forms a community whose life takes shape in common patterns, not merely in private experiences (Calvin 1960, IV.1.21–22, pp. 1035–36).

This movement from hearing to public edification is best clarified through Calvin's implicit account of conscience formation. Because the Word is preached and heard within the assembly, it does not merely convey doctrinal content but addresses the hearer as a responsible agent, forming habits of moral perception and judgment under a norm external to both the individual and the community. In worship, Christians are repeatedly trained to receive divine promise and command as authoritative, which means that conscience is schooled not by social convention or political expediency but by the gospel's summons to

repentance, forgiveness, and truthfulness (Calvin 1960, IV.1.20–22, pp. 1034–36). Calvin’s emphasis on hearing thus entails a social discipline: the church becomes a people capable of being corrected, of enduring in truth, and of resisting the drift toward self-justifying narratives that often stabilize communal life at the expense of honesty (Gerrish 1993, pp. 159–65).

This conscience formation has public consequences without becoming a direct political program. Calvin does not treat preaching as a means of turning the pulpit into civil legislation. Rather, he assumes that preaching generates a community with a shared moral grammar—patience rather than vengeance, reconciliation rather than factionalism, and truth-telling rather than propaganda—virtues that are intrinsically social and therefore inevitably public (Gordon 2009, pp. 132–39). The same preaching that comforts and reconciles also judges and limits: it teaches believers how to place civil obedience within a hierarchy of loyalties, seeking peace while refusing any demand that would require impiety (Witte 2007, pp. 188–95). In that sense, “public edification” names not only the internal strengthening of the church but the production of a worship-formed people whose conduct among neighbors is shaped by what they have learned to hear and obey (Calvin 1960, IV.1.12, p. 1026; Witte 2007, p. 285).

3.4. *Preaching, Conscience, and the Public Shape of Obedience*

The public trajectory of preaching becomes clearer when framed through the category of conscience. Calvin’s preaching-centered ecclesiology assumes that the Word does not merely inform the intellect but addresses the person, claiming the hearer and thereby shaping moral perception and judgment (Calvin 1960, IV.1.5, p. 1018; Pettegree 2005, p. 115). In worship, the church repeatedly learns to receive divine promise and command as authoritative, which implies that conscience is formed under a norm that is not reducible to social convention or political expediency. Preaching thus produces not only belief but a habituated responsiveness: the willingness to be corrected, the capacity to discern competing claims of loyalty, and the courage to endure in truth when the surrounding culture offers alternative “gospels” of power, security, or status (Calvin 1960, IV.1.22, pp. 1035–36; Pettegree 2005, pp. 145–47).

This conscience formation is inherently communal. Because the Word is heard in the assembly, believers are trained not only as individuals but as a people who share a common moral grammar—repentance, forgiveness, truthfulness, and reconciliation (Calvin 1960, IV.1.5, p. 1017; IV.1.21–23, pp. 1035–36). That shared grammar is what enables “public edification” to be more than an internal ecclesial slogan. It gives the church a recognizable posture in the world: a community that learns restraint rather than vengeance, truth-telling rather than propaganda, and peace-making rather than factionalism (Calvin 1960, IV.1.12, p. 1026; Gordon 2009, pp. 207–9). In this sense, preaching has public consequences not because it directly prescribes a political platform but because it forms a community capable of principled action and principled refusal.

Accordingly, Calvin’s later insistence that obedience to civil authorities is real yet bounded should be read as downstream from the Word’s formative work. The church can practice “bounded obedience” precisely because conscience has been schooled—week after week—by proclamation that both comforts and judges (Calvin 1960, IV.1.5, p. 1018). Preaching forms Christians who can seek public peace without surrendering ultimate allegiance, and who can resist impiety not as autonomous radicals but as members of a worship-formed community (Witte 2007, pp. 183–85).

4. Sacrament as Practices of Embodied Formation

If preaching forms the church as a hearing community, the sacraments form it as an embodied community. Calvin’s second mark of the visible church—the right administration

of the sacraments—should be read as worship practices that enact the gospel in visible signs and thereby train Christians in communal identity, repentance, and love (Calvin 1960, IV.17.44, p. 1422). The sacraments are not mere appendages to preaching. They are practices in which God confirms promises to weak faith and believers publicly attest piety before God and one another (Gerrish 1993, pp. 51–52).

Recent scholarship on Calvin highlights the communal and affective aspects of sacramental participation. Notably, Randall Zachman (2009) and Charles Partee (2008) argue that Calvin regards union with Christ as inherently linked to incorporation into Christ's body. Their analyses indicate that the sacramental theology presented in *Institutes* IV functions not as a doctrinal appendix, but as a systematic explanation of how repeated liturgical participation forms communal identity and ethical orientation.

4.1. Sacrament as Sealing and Mutual Attestation

Calvin defines the sacrament as an outward sign by which the Lord “seals” divine promises on consciences to sustain faith's weakness; correspondingly, believers “attest” their piety toward God before the Lord, angels, and human witnesses. This double movement—divine confirmation and human attestation—means that sacramental practice is never purely inward. The sacraments are public actions with a communal grammar: they locate believers within a visible people whose life is shaped by promise, confession, and shared participation (Gerrish 1993, pp. 62–67).

This is one reason Calvin's sacramental theology is especially fruitful for a “worship-to-ethics” reading. Sacraments do not simply symbolize ideas; they instruct by doing. They operate as embodied pedagogy, forming Christians through enacted belonging and repeated participation in communal rites. In Reformation worship debates, this move away from ritual as meritorious performance toward ritual as evangelical promise and communal formation is central (Eire 1986, pp. 197–211).

4.2. Baptism: Initiation, Repentance, and Public Belonging

For Calvin, baptism is the initiatory sign by which believers are received into the society of the church, engrafted into Christ, and reckoned among God's children (Calvin 1960, IV.4.1–6, pp. 1303–8). Baptism is therefore not a private milestone detached from communal life; it is incorporation into a visible community, with ethical consequences for how the self is narrated and lived (Tuininga 2017, pp. 192–94).

Calvin's account foregrounds baptism's meaning for an entire life: cleansing is grounded in Christ's purity and promise, and therefore underwrites a penitential realism rather than perfectionism. Baptism also signifies mortification and renewal—dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:3–4)—as an enacted summons to “walk in newness of life” (Calvin 1960, IV.4.3–14, pp. 1305–14). Union with Christ is not treated as a private possession; it becomes the basis for incorporation into Christ's body, locating Christian identity intrinsically within relationships of obligation and care (Gordon 2009, p. 166).

This communal formation is particularly evident in Calvin's defense of infant baptism. By insisting that children of believers are baptized into the covenant, Calvin underscores that Christian identity is not essentially a product of individual choice but of divine initiative and communal nurture. The church functions as ‘mother’ precisely by receiving these members into her care before they can speak for themselves. Consequently, the ethical life of the Christian begins not with autonomous action but with reception into a body that pledges to raise the baptized in the ‘fear and admonition of the Lord,’ thereby grounding public responsibility in a prior experience of grace and ecclesial belonging (Calvin 1960, IV.16.11–25, pp. 1333–49).

Crucially for the present argument, Calvin connects baptism with confession. The baptized life is publicly marked: believers are named as belonging to Christ and to Christ's people, and this belonging entails a posture of truth-telling about sin and grace. Such confession is not simply self-disclosure; it is communal identity formation—training in humility, resisting moral superiority, and orienting believers toward reconciliation within the church and toward responsibility toward neighbors. Baptism, then, functions as a formative rite that establishes a public identity of grace and a lifelong pattern of repentance.

4.3. *The Lord's Supper: Communion, Memory, and Mutual Love*

Where baptism initiates, the Lord's Supper sustains. Calvin's account of the Supper is particularly suited to a formative reading because he consistently emphasizes its communal purposes: remembrance of Christ's passion, thanksgiving, and the nourishment of mutual love and unity. Communion with Christ is described as necessary for those who aspire to heavenly life, and Calvin's imagery underscores that believers receive life from Christ rather than generating it within themselves.

At the same time, Calvin insists that the Supper's vertical dimension (participation in Christ) yields horizontal consequences (bonded communal life). The rite returns the church to the memory of Christ's passion to strengthen faith, urges thanksgiving, and finally nourishes mutual love as believers discern their unity in the one body of Christ (Calvin 1960, IV.17.8–9, pp. 1368–69). The Supper thus functions as a recurring rehearsal of social virtues: gratitude undermines possessiveness; remembrance shapes what a community honors and how it interprets suffering; unity and love train practices of reconciliation and peaceable coexistence (Gerrish 1993, pp. 169, 186–87).

This is precisely how sacramental worship supports an “in-between” account of Christian life. The church remains distinct in its worship and ministry, yet its sacramental practices cultivate habits that inevitably extend into broader social relations. Calvin's sacramental vision is therefore not an escape from earthly life but a training ground for it: an embodied gospel that forms a community capable of living among others with humility, generosity, and peace-seeking love.

4.4. *Sacraments and the Public Trajectory of Worship*

Taken together, baptism and the Supper make visible the church's belonging to Christ and form a communal life characterized by repentance, renewal, memory, gratitude, unity, and mutual love. These are not “church-only” virtues. They are dispositions that enable Christians to inhabit social life responsibly while refusing to collapse their primary allegiance to God into any competing loyalty. In Calvin's Reformation vision, sacramental worship is thus a hinge between ecclesial identity and public existence: constituted within worship, Christians are trained for life among neighbors (Calvin 1960, IV.17.44, p. 1422).

The public trajectory of sacramental worship becomes even clearer when attention is given to repetition and habituation. Baptism is a once-for-all initiatory sign, yet its meaning extends across the entire Christian life as believers repeatedly return to the promise signified in baptism through ongoing repentance and renewed obedience. The Lord's Supper, by contrast, is deliberately recurrent, and its repetition is not accidental but pedagogical. By returning the church again and again to Christ's self-giving, the Supper trains the community in a patterned set of dispositions—memory, gratitude, unity, and mutual love—that function as social virtues rather than private sentiments. Calvin's sacramental theology is therefore ethically significant not only because it describes what the rites ‘mean’ but because it shows what the rites ‘do’ over time: they form a people by rehearsing the gospel in embodied, communal action (Calvin 1960, IV.1.22, p. 1035).

This point strengthens the “in-between” thesis. The Supper forms a communal moral imagination: believers learn to interpret their identity through Christ’s passion and to evaluate their life through the logic of gift rather than the logic of merit, rivalry, or domination. Gratitude cultivated at the table undermines possessiveness and trains generosity; remembrance interrupts communal amnesia and sustains truthful storytelling about suffering and mercy; unity disciplines factionalism; and mutual love directs conflict toward reconciliation rather than retaliation (Calvin 1960, IV.17.44, pp. 1422–23). None of these virtues can remain confined within the liturgical moment, because they are precisely the habits required for durable social life among neighbors. In this way, sacramental worship supplies a concrete account of how Christian ethics emerges from worship without collapsing into moralism: the church is publicly marked by grace in baptism and repeatedly nourished into one body in the Supper, and this worship-formed identity shapes how Christians inhabit civil society while maintaining the church’s distinct allegiance to God (Witte 2007, p. 196).

5. Civic Government and Bounded Obedience

Calvin’s reflections on civil government in *Institutes* IV are treated here not as a comprehensive political theory but as a downstream implication of worship-formed Christian existence. If the preached Word schools conscience under the gospel’s norm and if the sacraments habituate a community into repentance, unity, and mutual love through repeated embodied participation, then Christian public life cannot be reduced either to withdrawal from society or to uncritical accommodation to it. Calvin’s “in-between” vision thus entails a public posture shaped by worship and disciplined by conscience: peace-seeking where possible, yet bounded by a higher obedience when civil demands would require impiety (Calvin 1960, IV.20.1–4, pp. 1487–89). In this sense, the question of civil obedience is not an external add-on to ecclesiology but a practical extension of the same formative logic that makes the church visible through Word and sacrament.

Calvin assigns civil government a divinely permitted function for life “among men”: maintaining outward order, promoting peace, and securing conditions in which communal life—including outward worship—may be preserved. Christians, therefore, owe magistrates obedience not because rulers are morally superior but because social life requires law and authority, and because believers are called to seek peace rather than foment disorder (Calvin 1960, IV.20.22–30, pp. 1510–17). Read through the lens of worship formation, this obedience is intelligible as a downstream social virtue: conscience trained by the Word learns restraint and truthfulness, and a community schooled by sacramental life learns humility and solidarity (Calvin 1960, IV.20.32, pp. 1520–21).

Yet Calvin’s ethic of obedience is bounded. The decisive limit is theological: obedience to human authorities must not become disobedience to God. Calvin invokes the apostolic principle, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), and reminds believers that they have been bought with a price (1 Cor 7:23), and therefore must not enslave themselves to impiety. Worship is the repeated site where this hierarchy of loyalties is enacted and reinforced: the Word judges and consoles, sacraments bind believers to Christ and to one another, and the church’s ministry strengthens consciences by gospel promises. Crucially, Calvin’s concept of resistance is distinct from modern revolutionary activism. His ethic of ‘bounded obedience’ does not authorize chaotic private resistance against tyrannical rulers. Instead, it frames refusal as a disciplined act of loyalty to the highest Sovereign. When Christians disobey an impious command, they do so not to undermine the principle of authority, but to uphold the order of justice established by God. This “conscientious refusal”—formed through the regular hearing of the Word—seeks to restore right order rather than to foment anarchy (Tuininga 2017, pp. 317–18, 347). Accordingly, Calvin’s framework yields neither political quietism nor revolutionary zeal as a default posture, but

rather a conscience-based, peace-seeking public responsibility—obedient where possible, resistant where obedience would require impiety.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that Calvin's ecclesiology in *Institutes* IV is best understood through the formative logic of worship. Calvin's well-known "marks" of the visible church—the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments—are not merely diagnostic criteria for identifying the true church. They are practices through which God gathers, sustains, and shapes a people in history, rendering the church publicly recognizable while forming Christians for a distinctive manner of life "in-between" church and society.

First, the preached Word forms the church as a hearing community. For Calvin, hearing is not passive reception but the ordinary means by which faith is generated, strengthened, and directed toward obedience. Preaching therefore trains conscience and communal life: it binds the church to a truth external to itself, cultivates teachability and repentance, and equips the community for public truthfulness in a contested world. In the Reformation setting, where worship reform was inseparable from disputes about authority and the integrity of the gospel's public communication, Calvin's insistence on preaching as a mark signals that the church's visibility is tethered to the event of proclamation rather than to institutional splendor or cultural dominance.

Second, the sacraments form the church as an embodied community. Calvin's definition already implies ethical direction: God seals promises to weak faith, and believers publicly attest piety before God and one another. Baptism incorporates believers into ecclesial belonging and establishes a lifelong orientation of cleansing, renewal, union with Christ, and confession—an enacted identity that resists privatized religion by situating Christians within a visible people who live by mercy. The Lord's Supper, in turn, sustains the church through communion with Christ and repeatedly trains the community in remembrance, thanksgiving, unity, and mutual love—social virtues that cannot remain sealed within the sanctuary. In this way, Calvin's sacramental theology functions as "embodied theology," in which gospel promise is not only heard but enacted, rehearsed, and socially internalized.

Third, the article has shown that this worship formation clarifies Calvin's account of public life without collapsing the church into society. Because worship trains conscience and binds believers to Christ and to one another, Christian participation in civil life is neither a matter of withdrawal nor of uncritical accommodation. Calvin can therefore commend peace-seeking obedience to civil authority while insisting upon its limit: obedience to humans must not become disobedience to God. The hierarchy of loyalties that governs this bounded obedience is not an abstract principle but a lived reality continually reinforced in worship, where the Word judges and consoles and the sacraments enact belonging to Christ.

By foregrounding the Word and sacrament as formative worship practices, this study contributes to ongoing discussions of Reformation worship as both theology and practice. The Reformation did not merely revise doctrinal statements; it contested and reconstructed the public practices by which Christian communities were identified and by which believers were formed for life among others. Calvin's marks of the church, read in this light, provide a focused account of how worship generates an "in-between" Christian existence: ecclesially constituted, communally disciplined toward reconciliation, and publicly oriented toward responsibility in the world.

More specifically, this study advances Calvin scholarship in three significant ways. First, it reframes the discussion of the marks of the church by shifting attention from their primarily polemical and identificatory roles to their formative and liturgical functions

within the gathered assembly. Second, it integrates ecclesiology and social ethics into worship practice, thereby supplementing existing research that often addresses Calvin's political theology or moral teaching apart from his liturgical reforms. Third, by emphasizing the habituating nature of the Word and sacrament, it situates Calvin within broader Reformation worship studies that examine the constructive relationship among theology, ritual practice, and public life. Therefore, this article argues that Calvin's distinctive contribution lies not only in doctrinal precision but also in articulating a coherent vision of worship as the primary context for cultivating Christian public responsibility.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Calvin, John. 1960. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Eire, Carlos M. N. 1986. *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gerrish, Brian A. 1993. *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Gordon, Bruce. 2009. *Calvin*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Manetsch, Scott M. 2015. *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGrath, Alister E. 2012. *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Parker, Thomas H. L. 1992. *Calvin's Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Partee, Charles. 2008. *The Theology of John Calvin*. Louisville: WJK.
- Pettegree, Andrew. 2005. *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spijker, Willem van't. 2009. *Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought*. Translated by Lyle D. Bierma. Louisville: WJK.
- Spinks, Bryan D. 2006. *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*. New York: Routledge.
- Tuininga, Matthew J. 2017. *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Witte, John, Jr. 2007. *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zachman, Randall C. 2009. *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.