CALVIN IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES¹

Agustinus M.L. Batlajery, Ph.D.
Dosen Teologi Sistematika Fakultas Teologi UKIM, Ambon

Calvinist Teachings Arrive in Indonesia

In 1605 the Navy of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), a Dutch trading company, seized the Portuguese strongholds of Banda and Ambon in the Moluccas.² For the first time, on February 27th that year, the crew of the Dutch ship worshipped at the fortress which they called Fort Victoria. That was the first Protestant worship service ever held in the Moluccas and, in fact, in Indonesia. This was the beginning of the history of Protestantism in this region.³ It was a Dutch Reformed Church worship service, and the Protestant

¹ Paper presented to the IRTI Conference in Aix-en-Provence, France, July 2009.

² Th. van den End, *Ragi Carita 1*. Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 1999, 65.

³ Th. van den End, "Gereja Protestan Pada Zaman VOC", in Samuel B. Hakh & Yusak Soleman, (eds), *Sejarah Gereja Protestan di Indonesia 1*. Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2005, 14-51, here 17.

church introduced to Indonesians from that time on was the Reformed Church. In regions controlled by the VOC, Reformed Church teachings and practices were in effect, and they were Calvinist. The three confessional documents used in Holland were also used in Indonesia and were the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Canon of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism.⁴ The Church Order that was adopted was also the Presbyterian-Synodal church order established by the Dordrecht Synod in 1618-1619.⁵ This continued until the VOC disbanded in 1799. So, throughout the 17th century until the 18th century, Calvinist teachings were brought to Indonesia through the Dutch Reformed Church.

From the end of the 18th century until the 19th century, mission societies were established to evangelize in Indonesia at the initiative of inter-church groups in Holland and Germany. Those mission societies included the Netherlands Missionary Society (NZG, 1799), the Renish Mission Society (RMG, 1828), the Java committee (JC, 1855), the Netherlands Mission Society (NZV, 1858), the Utrecht Mission Society (UZV, 1859), and the Netherlands Reformed Mission Society (NGZV, 1859). A mission society was also formed by a group of Orthodox-Reformed Christians from the Reformed (Hervormd) Church in the Netherlands, referred to as the Reformed Mission Association (GZB, 1901). With the exception of the GZB, these mission societies were not purely Calvinist, for Calvinist teachings had been combined with Pietism and Lutheranism. Nevertheless, Calvinist teachings were influential because of the Reformed (Gereformeerd) and Reformed (Hervormd) members within them.

From the mid-19th century until the mid-20th century, certain churches in Holland carried out direct evangelistic efforts in Indonesia. The Christian Reformed Churches (CGK) began their work in 1860.

⁴ Chr. de Jonge, *Apa Itu Calvinisme* Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 1998, 32.

⁵ Chr. de Jonge, *Apa Itu Calvinisme*. Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 1998, 32.

In 1894 the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) worked through the mission society called the Mission of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (ZGKN succeeding NGZV). The Liberated Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt) began its work in 1956 and the Reformed Congregations Church (Gereformeerde Gemeenten) in 1962. These church and mission societies brought with them Orthodox Calvinist traditions of the 16th century. The Psalms were sung in the worship service, and the Heidelberg Catechism was used for catechism. Thus, throughout the 18th century up to the 19th, Calvinist teaching was brought to Indonesia by mission societies. It was only in the 20th century that Calvinist churches conducted evangelism.

After that, Calvinist teachings came to Indonesia by means of several publications. In 1967 a book entitled *Calvin, Djalan Hidup Dan Karjanya* (*Calvin, His Life and Work*) was translated from a book by the Dutch theologian W.F. Dankbaar. In 1980 Th. van den End headed up a team which translated the book *Institutio* by Calvin into Bahasa Indonesia.⁶ For the first time Indonesians were able to read Calvin's writing in their own language. In the meantime, a book written by an Indonesian theologian was first published in 1990 – the book by J.L.Ch. abineno, *Perjamuan Malam Menurut Para Reformator* (*The Last Supper According to the Reformers*).⁷ In it he described Calvin's understanding of Holy Communion. After that, writings about Calvin were written by a Dutch historian who was once a Church History lecturer at the Theological Seminary (STT) in Jakarta. In 1998 Chr. de Jonge wrote a book in Indonesian entitled *Apa Itu Calvinisme* (*What*

⁶ Published under the title: *Yohanes Calvin, Institutio, Pengajaran Agama Kristen*. Translated by Winarsih, J.S. Aritonang, Arifin and Th. van den End as Editor. The two-volume *Institutio* was not published into English in its entirety but only in summary form.

⁷ A few years later another book by Abineno was published with the title, *Johanes Calvin Pembangunan Jemaat Tata Gereja dan Jabatan Gereja*. 1992.

Is Calvinism?). To supplement De Jonge's book, Th. van den End then translated several Calvinist documents and published them in 2000 in a book entitled *Enam Belas Dokumen Dasar Calvinisme (Sixteen Basic Documents of Calvinism)*.⁸ Since the 1990s the Lembaga Reformed Injili Indonesia, or LRII (Indonesian Evangelical Reformed Institute) has translated books about Calvinism into Bahasa Indonesia. In this way, Calvinist teachings have become increasingly familiar in Indonesia.

The Influence of Calvinist Teachings in the Churches of Indonesia Until the Present

The VOC and mission societies in Indonesia left behind a legacy of Calvinist traditions still being preserved by Indonesian churches. Examinations of the confession of faith, church order, liturgy and other church practices reveal that:

- a. The Confession of Faith of some churches, interestingly enough, recognizes the true church as one which exhibits the signs indicated in the teachings of Calvin. As for signs of the true church, it is said: *We believe and confess that the church is the true church: 1) where the Gospel is purely preached, and 2) where the true sacraments are administered in accordance with the Word of Jesus Christ.*⁹ This is called "*notae ecclesiae*" in Calvin's ecclesiology.¹⁰

⁸ Th. van den End, *Enam Belas Dokumen Dasar Calvinisme*. Jakarta: 2000. This book contains the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, the Church Order, and the Order of Worship of the Calvinist church from the 16th-17th centuries.

⁹ L. Purwanto, *Indonesian Church Order Under Scrutiny*. Kampen: 1998, 81-82; 100. He refers to the churches such as HKBP (Batak Protestant Church), GKPI (Protestant Christian Church in Indonesia), and the GMI (Methodist Church in Indonesia); cf. Lukas Visser, (ed.), *Reformed Witness Today A Collection of Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches*. Bern: 1982.

¹⁰ Inst. IV.i. 9; cf. B.C. Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*. Leiden: 1970, 100.

- b. The document called *Common Understanding of the Christian Faith in Indonesia*, issued by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (CCI), reverberates with Calvin's teachings about the church and state. The government, as an institution decreed by God, is entrusted with the task of protecting people and rejecting evil. At the same time, the church is obligated to pray for the government and assist it, yet admonish it if it misuses its authority.¹¹
- c. Continuing with Calvinist understanding, that the word and the will of God must be upheld in all fields of life is still a model for Christians in the society at large. The will of God must not only be conveyed within the 'walls' of the church but to the world and within the world. This understanding is supported by the presence of Christians in politics, despite its tarnished image. Even in the field of politics, the will of God must be upheld.¹² In his research, Z. Ngelow noted that the presence of Christians in national mass movements was motivated by a Calvinist understanding. There are even some Christian politicians who have sought to justify their involvement in politics by referring to the teachings of Calvin and Abraham Kuyper. Referring to the view of Kuyper, they see politics and Christianity as an integral whole, meaning that Christian teaching underlies politics. For them, the government is the servant of God. They reject the view of Christians who do not want to become associated with politics because they separate religious affairs from worldly affairs, that is, the state.¹³ It was

¹¹ PGI, *Dokumen Keesaan Gereja*. Jakarta: 2000, 81.

¹² Z.J. Ngelow, *Kekristenan dan Nasionalisme*. Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 1994, 89-93; cf. S. Sirait, *Politik Kristen di Indonesia, Suatu Tinjauan Etis*. Jakarta: 2000, 210-214.

¹³ Z.J. Ngelow, *Kekristenan dan Nasionalisme*, 91-92. Sutarno discusses this problem as well in his 1970 dissertation at Free University entitled, "*Het Kuyperiaanse model van een Christelijke Politieke Organisatie: een onderzoek naar zijn doelmatigheid als middel om het politiek-staatskundige leven vanuit het christelijk geloof te beïnvloeden*".

this understanding that advanced the formation of the Indonesian Christian Party (Parkindo) in 1945.

- d. It should be noted that the Church Order of many Indonesian churches with a Calvinist background includes a Presbyterian Synodical governance system firmly attached to it.¹⁴ Some include it in the introduction and others as a part of the ecclesiological basis for that Church Order. Lazarus Purwanto discovered this in his research on the various Church Order found in Indonesian churches.¹⁵ This system includes such elements as Consistory, Clasis, and Synod Assemblies. So too, the system for choosing and calling the pastor, elders and deacons is still practiced in certain churches.
- e. In the worship service, songs from the Psalms have not been eliminated from the treasury of ecclesiastical hymns in Indonesia even though many hymnals have emerged to enrich the storehouse of songs of worship in Indonesia. For some congregations, the Psalms are sung during one designated worship week out of four each month. For others, the Psalms are sung during any worship service.¹⁶
- f. In regard to worship practices, there is still a tradition which is carried out a week before celebrating Holy Communion in which every member of the congregation is asked to examine himself. The purpose is to enable each member to take part in Holy Communion properly, as stated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:28. If we

¹⁴ See for example Church Order of The Protestant Church in the Moluccas (GPM); The Protestant Church of Western Indonesia (GPIB); The Christian Church of Java (GKJ); The Indonesian Christian Church (GKI); and The Evangelical Christian Church in Minahasa (GMIM).

¹⁵ L. Purwanto, *Indonesian Church Order Under Scrutiny*. Kampen: 1998.

¹⁶ The GJPI Church in Papua, established through the mission efforts of the Gereformeerde Gemeente in Netherlands, only sings the Psalms during worship services.

check, we will find that this does not deviate from the Order of Holy Communion of Calvin used in Strasbourg and Geneva.¹⁷

- g. In regard to the Order of Matrimony, traditionally that three weeks before the wedding takes place, the couple's names must be announced to the congregation so that if there are any objections, the congregation can declare them. This is in line with the Order of Matrimony designed by Calvin which is used in Strasbourg and Geneva.¹⁸

Challenges for Calvinist Teachings in Indonesia

Eben Nuban Timo, a lecturer in Systematic Theology in the Faculty of Theology at Artha Wacana Christian University and head of the GMIT synod in Kupang, wrote a book published in 2005 in which he discusses views on predestination dogma that have appeared in church news reports down through the years. One of them is John Calvin's notion of double predestination. Calvin, he says, used the phrase, "*decrutum absolutum*" to refer to his teaching on "the election". God's selection of the chosen came before grace (*gratiam praecreditelection*). This means that God's final decision (*absolute decreed*) preceded Jesus Christ and was determined outside of the love of God in Jesus Christ. As a result, from the beginning God had chosen a select group of people to be saved and another group to be condemned. In predestination God's will was dualistic. God intended that half of the people would be saved and the other half punished. Calvin's view, he says, was exactly the opposite from biblical testimony. The Bible verse cited as an example is Colossians 1:15-20. Using this verse as a starting point, he claims that nothing that God the Father decided or did was

¹⁷ Van den End, *Enam Belas Dokumen*, 449; quoted from P. Barth & W. Niesel, *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, I. Munchen: 1926.

¹⁸ van Den End, *Enam Belas Dokumen*, 442-443; quoted from P. Barth & W. Niesel, *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, I. Munchen: 1926.

outside of or without the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Whatever the Father did, both during history or before the mountains were formed and the world created, was done in, together with, and for Jesus Christ. God the Father did not make any decision or have any other plan of work outside or prior to Jesus Christ as stated by Calvin in his *decrutum absolutum*. For that reason he feels predestination is misleading.¹⁹

Another view was presented during a seminar on ecclesiology held by the Moluccas Protestant Church Synod (GPM) in October 2008. One of the speakers at that seminar, John Titaley, Professor of Social Theology at Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga, presented a paper entitled "GPM and the Legacy of Protestantism: the Perspective of Contextualization". In it he stressed that one justifies his life of faith not just through his confession of faith but through his actions. Using Matthew 7:21 and Matthew 25:3-46 as a departure point, he stressed that the important thing is not whether a person has to become Calvinist but rather how he acts. In Titaley's opinion, GPM is a church not because it is Calvinist in the sense that it defends or upholds Calvinistic teachings and uses a Presbyterian Synodical church structure, but rather because of what it does for humanity. For GPM to discuss Calvinism is, therefore, irrelevant. The context of Calvin was very different than the context of Indonesia. If Calvin had lived in a pluralistic society like Indonesia with the largest Muslim population, what he wrote would have been different. He could never have applied his Geneva "*magistrate*" in Indonesia.²⁰

The same idea was presented by John Ruhulestin, lecturer of Social Theology at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku (UKIM) and the Head of the GPM Synod. In a paper presented at the same seminar, he stated that GPM had inherited the theology and ecclesiology of

¹⁹ Eben Nuban Timo, *Pemberita Firman Pencinta Budaya*, 151-153.

²⁰ John Titaley, *GPM dan Warisan Protestantisme: Perspektif Kontekstualisasi*. Ambon: 2008, 2-3; unpublished paper.

Calvinism. But this theology and ecclesiology of Calvinism, as well as the Presbyterian Synodical System, was the product of a continental society. Meanwhile, GPM is an "archipelagic church" where its congregations are separated by vast seas. Therefore, the theology and ecclesiology of Calvinism which was produced in a continental society might not be applicable in the context of an archipelagic church such as in the Moluccas.²¹

Conclusion

To probe more deeply into the legacy of Calvinist tradition in churches in Indonesia would require further research into the history, theology, teaching and practice of churches here. Furthermore, further studies would be required to see the extent to which Calvin's thoughts are still relevant in the Indonesian context. Here the role of Calvinist churches in Indonesia is important. To celebrate 500 years of Calvin, the Indonesian Christian Church (GKI), for example, conducted a series of symposiums about Calvin which began in December 2008 and will continue on until July 2009. In June 2009 the Evangelical Protestant Church in Minahasa (GMIM) and the Indonesian Calvin Society (ICS) held a seminar on a variety of themes. The Evangelical Kalimantan Church (GKE) will hold a seminar as well in August 2009, discussing, among other things, the topics of Theocracy, Democracy, Church and State, the Presbyterian Synodical System, Church Discipline, Worship, Diaconal Service, and Work Ethic. Studies of this sort will show that some teachings of Calvin are no longer relevant to the current situation of churches in Indonesia.

²¹John Ruhullessin, *Eklesiologi GPM dalam Konteks Masyarakat Kepulauan*. Ambon: 2008, 6-7; unpublished paper.