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The Significance of John Calvin Today

David Streater

The church at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with its unfinished task of taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations, faces immense challenges from resurgent ancient religions, the revival of Gnosticism in modern form, and in the West, post-modernism. The base from which the modern mission movement has reached out is itself under threat as the hedonism of modern secular culture saps the life of the church.

In addition to the threat from outside sources, the church itself shows little sign of recognizing the problem but is raising up a leadership that essentially sees no antithesis between the agenda of the church and that of the world. The answer given by such leadership is to join with the calls to bring the world into the church. No doubt the motive is to sanctify the world but the result in the West has been to de-sanctify the church.¹

In the less-developed countries, mission outreach has gained its thousands and the call has come to send Bible teachers over to help them. This poses a problem in that while the Western church has the financial resources it does not have the confidence in the Bible as God's word to be able to disciple the emergent churches. This lack of confidence arises from a lack of faith in the Scriptures and demonstrates a low view of God himself. This is not a plea for obscurantism but rather for an educated ministry that is firstly devotional and secondly academic. Where may we find such an example? We would suggest John Calvin.

To attempt any assessment of the life and work of John Calvin in a small compass and therefore try to quantify his influence upon the church at large as well as the political processes of history is rather like attempting to pour a quart into a pint pot. It may be attempted but it is inevitable that much may be spilt. To begin with, any study of the life of Calvin will need to take into account the prejudice with which his name is surrounded. For many, Calvin's name simply raises the prejudice concerning the theory of predestination. If that is not sufficient to condemn him, he is guilty of involvement in the execution of the heretic, Michael Servetus. These

¹ The outcome of the 1998 Lambeth Conference is indicative of the major difference in the Anglican Communion between the growing churches of the Southern Hemisphere and the declining churches of the West.

comments are simply intended to warn us that in dealing with the large characters of history we need to be careful neither to eulogize nor condemn them out of hand.

However this raises the question as to whether any historian can be absolutely objective. The historian has both his presuppositions and prejudices too. While objectivity may be aimed at, the target is seldom if ever hit, for the study of history is essentially made up of two interrelated factors. Firstly, there is the selection of the significant facts in their context and secondly the interpretation of those facts. It is clear that there will be, by the nature of the case, presuppositions. Where facts are absent, fine judgments must be made. However, allowing for presuppositions and prejudices, the historian must endeavour to deal with the reality of the life situation of the period. He must also be careful not to impose current, politically correct views on those who do not live in our own time.

1 The Background of the Reformation

In 1518 the Dutch Scholar, Desiderius Erasmus, who was then 51 years old, and believing that his death could not be long delayed, expressed the wish that he might be spared for a number of years. He said: 'for this only reason that I believe I see a golden age dawning in the near future'.² Erasmus lived for another 20 years and the idea of the golden age disappeared with the break up of Western Medieval Christendom. War between the Pope and the Emperor, the Peasants' Uprising and the religious crisis of the Protestant Reformation all shook Western Europe to its foundation and for Erasmus the golden age had become the 'worst century since Jesus Christ'. For William Cunningham, the erudite Scots Presbyterian scholar of the nineteenth century, the Reformation of the sixteenth century 'was the greatest event, or series of events, that has occurred since the close of the canon of Scripture'.³

From the early part of the sixteenth century, the view one held of the Reformation and of the characters that played significant parts in it was heavily coloured by one's personal position, with both Protestant and Roman controversialists placing their own interpretation upon events, a trend that has continued well into this century. Happily, at the present time historians are prepared to be more careful in their interpretation. Luther is no longer a mad monk driven by sexual obsession but has been partly rehabilitated in principle by the Roman Church into a monk obsessed with

2 T George *Theology of the Reformers* (Leicester: Apollon 1988) p 13

3 W Cunningham *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (London: BoTT 1967)

the fear of death. This is partly true and much closer to reality than the slander of sexual obsession. The point was that he was delivered from the fear of death by the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Calvin studies, particularly because of Karl Barth's interest, as studies of the Reformation and the Reformers in general, have become less prejudiced and more objective.

The Problem of Transition

There is a further complication. Proper consideration must be given to the historical context. How is the period, and inevitably the characters, to be interpreted? Where, for example, does the Reformation fit?

Is it part of the late Middle Ages?

Is it the beginning of the Modern Era?

How is the Reformation related to the Renaissance?

We shall need to define our terms. By the term Middle Ages, we mean that period of Western European history between the fall of Rome and the Protestant Reformation (fourth century to the sixteenth century). That period is itself divided into early, high and late. The Modern Era is that period of time from the eighteenth century to the present. The Renaissance roughly spans the fourteenth to the sixteenth century and was concerned with the study of the classical texts. The Reformation is that religious movement which arose in the sixteenth century but its roots go back to the fourteenth century.

Even with the definitions, the answers to the questions are not simple. Nonetheless, the point is that, like our own period at the end of the twentieth century, the late Middle Ages was an age of transition. Just as Christendom developed out of the collapsed glory that was Greece and the ruins of Rome, so the Renaissance developed from the collapse of Western Medieval Catholicism with its claim to rule the spiritual, intellectual and temporal interests of peoples and nations. The Middle Ages saw an attempt to create and maintain a theocratic government through the church. In contrast to theocracy, the idea of man being autonomous⁴ lay at the heart of the Renaissance. It was a revival of ancient paganism nourished by the study of the classical texts.

Paradoxically, from the same studies there arose Christian humanism which, studying the classical languages, engaged with the theology of the

4 W E Henley *Invictus* 'It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.'

Churchman

New Testament and in particular the epistles of Paul. That this had become necessary can be demonstrated from the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas was a Dominican monk who had studied at the Universities of Naples and Paris. He was the outstanding theologian of his day and his influence is still felt in Roman theology. Thomas Aquinas relied heavily on the writings of Aristotle (384-322 BC) who, with Plato (? 427-? 347), was one of the greatest Greek philosophers. While Plato emphasized the absolutes, Aristotle emphasized the individual things of this life. Pope Urban IV had forbidden the study of Aristotle in the universities but Aquinas had Aristotle rehabilitated and brought the Greek philosopher's teaching into the teaching of the church. Francis Schaeffer writes:

Aquinas held that man had revolted against God and thus was fallen but Aquinas had an incomplete view of the Fall. He thought that the Fall did not affect man as a whole but only in part. In his view the will was fallen or corrupted but the intellect was not affected. Thus people could rely on their own human wisdom and this meant that people were free to mix the teachings of the Bible with the teachings of the non-Christian philosophers.⁵

This left a situation where grace and nature were equal parts of the same equation. God is sovereign and man is sovereign. That equation cannot be sustained, not least because on the God side of the equation there is always infinity which by the nature of man is absent. The problem is that humans are particular things. If one begins with man, how can any ultimate and adequate meaning for life be found? Without some ultimate meaning, what is the basis for morals, values and law? There can be no certainty about what is right and what is wrong. Renaissance humanism found no way to resolve the tension between the absolute and the individual.

This meant that there were three parties involved in the Renaissance and Reformation position. There was a revival of neo-paganism and autonomous man. There was Medieval Catholicism with its flawed theological view of the ability of human nature and there was the Protestant Reformation. As the Reformers engaged with the teaching of the Bible, the three great statements of the Reformation became critical; *sola fides*, *sola scriptura* and *sola Deo gloria*.

Behind this is the sovereignty of God. Erasmus and Luther debated the question of the position of the human will. If you make man equal to God, you actually raise him above God. Erasmus, following Aquinas, wrote, *A Discussion concerning Free Will* and Luther replied with *The Bondage of*

⁵ F Schaeffer *How should we then live?* (New Jersey: Fleming H Revell 1976) p 52

the Will which is a major classic of the Reformation. This point is at the heart of the difference between Rome and the Protestant churches of the Reformation.

Erasmus was a Renaissance scholar who wished to see minor reforms within Rome. However, the problem in the Middle Ages was that the church at large had lost the Pauline doctrine of Grace, unmerited and unearned in Christ. The recovery of the ability to read the Greek texts clearly demonstrated that the Vulgate, not least in the New Testament doctrine of justification by faith alone, was flawed in its translation. In Germany, Luther articulated this and its associated doctrines⁶ and Zwingli of Zurich emphasized the primary authority of the Bible. In nearly all the major doctrines the Reformers were agreed. It was John Calvin, humanist scholar, theologian, preacher and trained lawyer who brought his mind to bear on setting out a systematic coherent Protestant doctrine to which Rome replied in the interminable Council of Trent (1545-1563).

So the Reformation in one sense was born from the soil of the Renaissance. We may trace the beginnings of the Renaissance to fourteenth-century Italy, which, although dominated by clericalism, paradoxically was more lay-oriented in its character. Lawyers and doctors led the way. There were fresh stirrings of interest in literature, art and the problems of life. Between 1450 and 1660 there began a 'brave new world'.

This period was one of the most significant in European history. It effected a change in man's attitude towards the problem of human existence and began to shape the modern world. It is essentially the root from which the Enlightenment grew and to which we now have the reaction of post-modernism. The scholastic movement began with the motto, *Credo ut intelligam* (I believe that I may understand) but ground to a halt with the words, *Credo quia absurdum* (I believe because it is absurd). Post-modernism says much the same.

The Renaissance gave birth to the pagan autonomy of man and so enthroned rationalism, which became the Enlightenment, the age of reason, in the eighteenth century. Schaeffer comments on Michelangelo's sculptures:

In the Academy in Florence are Michelangelo's (1475-1564) statues of men 'tearing themselves out of the rock'. These were sculpted between 1519 and 1536. They make a real humanistic statement: Man will make himself great... At the focal point of the room [is] the magnificent statue of David (1504). As a work of art it has few

6 Romans 8:28 f

equals in the world... But let us notice David is not David of the Bible. David was simply a title ... in the statue the figure is not circumcised. The David was the statement of what humanistic man saw himself as being tomorrow.⁷

This has lasted to the present but is now being overturned by the irrational because the mind of man is unable to bear the whole weight of the created order. Only in the Triune Creator God do we find both Unity and Diversity.

Brother Martin, obsessed with the problem of mortality in plague-ridden Europe, with the righteousness of God and the problems of penance, purgatory and payments for indulgences laid the axe to the tree according to the Council of Trent. He did this with the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Zwingli in Zurich had emphasized the sole sufficiency of Scripture and had removed the organ from the Great Minster.

Calvin, younger than either man, emphasized the primacy of the Almighty Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, creator, preserver and redeemer, and to borrow a question and answer from the *Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Divines* of the seventeenth century: 'What is the chief end of man? – The chief end of man is to worship God and to enjoy him forever.'⁸ The answer to humanism, the sovereignty of man, is not the semi-sovereignty of God but the full sovereignty of God, not forgetting its corollary, the responsibility of man.

2 The Life of John Calvin

Calvin stands among the leading Reformers of the sixteenth century and enjoys the pre-eminence with Martin Luther (1483-1546) of the German Reformation and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) of Zurich in the Swiss Reformation. These three form a triumvirate of Reformers who significantly affected the outcome of the Reformation. Both Luther and Zwingli entered the conflict of the Reformation at an earlier date than Calvin (1509-1564) and there is no doubt that this accounts for the particular influence that Calvin exerted.

Early days

Calvin was born in France, in Noyon, north east of Paris. His father was an influential church lawyer in the diocese with an aspiration to rise in the

⁷ F Schaeffer *How should we then live?* p 72

⁸ Question 1 *Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Divines*

world. Calvin himself was a bright child and as a teenager was sent to Paris with sons of a noble family to be educated. While in Paris he came into contact with Lutheran Reformers. Calvin had been designed for the priesthood and was in possession of the income of two benefices that were to be used to finance his education. However, his father quarrelled with the Bishop of Noyon and Calvin was thereafter designed for the law.

We know that Calvin was originally very religious and had been instructed by his pious mother. He relates that he had at one time kissed the relic of a saint. We do not know precisely when he became a convinced Protestant but it is clear that although reticent on the subject, Calvin underwent a conversion experience that changed both his life and his outlook.

Persecution

Calvin had become a brilliant humanist scholar and his legal studies had sharpened his mind. He wrote a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*. This may well have been a plea for mercy for Protestants in danger of being executed. However when he wrote the address for Nicolas Cop who was elected Rector of the University of Paris, pleading for a Lutheran Reformation, there was an explosion of anti-Protestant feeling. Both Cop and Calvin had to flee from Paris for safety and for the next three years he was travelling to avoid arrest.

The Institutes of the Christian Religion

During this time he wrote a pamphlet attacking the idea of 'soul sleep' and also a preface to a translation of the French Bible by Olivetan. The most significant book to come from his pen was the first edition of *Christianae Religionis Institutio*. This was a slim volume of some seven chapters and was prefaced by a letter to Francis I of France defending the Protestants against their adversaries. Lindsay writes:

The book was the strongest weapon Protestantism had yet forged against the Papacy and the letter 'a bold proclamation solemnly made by a young man of six and twenty who more or less unconsciously assumed the command of Protestantism against its enemies, calumniators and persecutors'.⁹

At this time Francis I was seeking an alliance with the German Lutheran princes and to that end was posing as a protector of the Lutherans in his realm. In fact, he was planning precisely the opposite and meant to drive

⁹ T M Lindsay *History of the Reformation* vol 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1934) p 99

all Lutherans out. Calvin used this opportunity to prepare a Protestant Confession based on the Apostles' Creed and proceeded to demonstrate that Protestants were the more truly Catholic.

The Apostles' Creed is the venerable symbol of the Western Church. It owes its authority to no Council but sprang directly from the heart of the church. To use it as a teaching symbol is to lay claim to the spiritual high ground. Calvin did not believe that he was founding a new church or developing a new theology. He believed with all the Reformers, save the Anabaptists, that the theology of the Reformation was the old teaching of the church of Christ, 'founded on the Word of God, and which had been known, or at least felt, by all pious people all down the generations from the earliest centuries'.¹⁰ The first Latin edition was published in 1536 and was followed by carefully revised editions in 1539 and 1559. In 1541 a French edition was published in his own translation as he says 'for the benefit of his countrymen'.

Farel and Geneva

Calvin's travels had taken him to Italy and on his return towards Strasbourg, he found his way blocked by a war. Calvin decided to proceed by a more circular route that would avoid the hostilities and so found himself overnight in Geneva. During that short stay William Farel, a passionate and fiery evangelist, who had been involved in the work of reformation in Geneva heard of his presence in the city. Farel determined that this young reformed humanist scholar should be the man to assist in the teaching of the biblical faith in Geneva.

Calvin was horrified at the prospect and refused, stating that he wished to devote himself to his studies. When Farel realized that all his arguments and entreaties were to no avail, he threatened Calvin with a curse on his studies. Calvin was so shaken that unwillingly he agreed to stay. So began a long association of the two men in the city of Geneva.

Defender of the Faith

Calvin's work continued much in the way that it began through the long association with the city. He lectured in St Peter's on the Epistles of Paul.¹¹ He began to make a strong impression on some of the citizens. An occasion arose where the city of Bern had conquered an area called Le Pays de Vaud. The Bern Council determined to instruct the newly acquired territory in Protestant principles. There was to be the utmost freedom of

¹⁰ Lindsay p101

¹¹ T George *Theology of the Reformers* 'Reader in Holy Scripture to the Church in Geneva' p180

debate. As Farel said: 'Truth is strong enough to outweigh falsehood; if you have it bring it forward.'¹²

Calvin had not meant to speak, leaving the debate to the older men, Farel and Viret. He intervened only when the accusation was made that the Reformers neglected the ancient Fathers, fearing that their authority was against them. Calvin rose and quoted one Father after another defending the Reformers' view of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.¹³

Reorganizing the Church

While a number of reforms had been carried out, much remained to be done and Calvin set about the reorganization along more biblical lines. The church was not able to proceed with these reforms without the permission of the civic authorities. It is interesting to remember that all the main-line Reformers were persuaded of the biblical nature of the relationship between the church and state. Calvin prepared a memorandum that set out four areas that needed attention:

- 1 The Lord's Supper
- 2 Singing in Public Worship
- 3 Instruction of Children
- 4 Marriage

1 The Lord's Supper

Calvin's desire was for the Holy Communion to be celebrated weekly, and he believed that this was the practice of the Apostolic Church. However, he realized that the people would not be able to accept this and he compromised on the basis of a monthly communion. To this Calvin added the provision of discipline whereby notorious offenders were excluded from the Table. To this end he suggested that worthy men should be appointed in all the quarters of the city who would report to the ministers any who were living an open life of sin. The ministers were to warn such people not to come to the Holy Supper and the discipline of excommunication would only begin as and when such warnings were not heeded.

2 Singing in Public Worship

Calvin taught that congregational singing of the Psalms ought to be part of the public worship. In the Middle Ages it was the monasteries, convents

¹² Lindsay p 103

¹³ Lindsay p 105

and cathedral choirs that mainly undertook the singing. His view was that when people sing, hearts are moved and worshippers are incited to pray along the lines learnt from the Psalms. Calvin suggested that children initially be taught how to sing and the congregation would gradually learn from them. This they did, especially the refugees who flocked to Geneva. A visitor to Geneva wrote that: 'Everyone sings...men and women, and it is a lovely sight. Each has a music book in his hand.' Calvin wrote in the Preface to the Psalter of 1542: 'we know by experience that singing has great force and vigour to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal'.¹⁴

3 Instruction of Children

Calvin believed it was most important for children to be instructed regularly in true Christian doctrine from an early age. A simple catechism should be prepared. The children should be brought before the pastors to be examined and the pastors should expound its teachings.¹⁵

4 Marriage

Geneva was renowned in the medieval world for its immorality. Calvin stated that the position of marriage should be carefully considered and steps taken to improve the moral climate.

We should find Calvin's attempt to regulate the private lives of the citizens of Geneva intolerable by today's standards. However, it needs to be noted that municipal laws in the Middle Ages were very strict, although often not observed. Related to this was Calvin's view of the early church of the first three centuries which he believed was the purest time. He attempted to regulate admission to the Holy Communion, excluding 'notorious evil doers'.¹⁶ This, even in the sixteenth century, was a highly controversial doctrine. Zwingli disagreed with it on the grounds that only the Lord can search out the heart.

Strasburg

Under these circumstances, it was only a matter of time before there was a collision between the pastors and the newly elected council. It came

14 T George *Theology of the Reformers* p 181. The Old Hundredth tune is an example of what were known as the 'Geneva jigs'.

15 *Book of Common Prayer* Rubric at end of Catechism: 'The Curate of every parish shall diligently upon Sundays and Holy Days, after the Second lesson at Evening Prayer, openly in the Church instruct and examine so many children of his parish sent unto him, as he shall think convenient, in some part of this Catechism.'

16 *Book of Common Prayer*. Note the Rubrics concerning admission to the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

through the demands of Bern. Calvin and Farel were sent away, Farel to Neuchatel and Calvin to Strasburg at the invitation of Martin Bucer. While there Calvin was involved in conferences and met the German Protestants, striking a warm friendship with Philip Melanchthon, and even Luther warmed to him, accepting Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper which was the cause of serious conflict and division between Luther and Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529.

Bucer had a strong influence on Calvin and there is little doubt that he would have spent the rest of his life there with the French Refugees' congregation. However trouble struck Geneva and it was clear that the city lacked leadership. The Romanist party exploited this situation. Cardinal Sadoletto wrote a letter to the Council suggesting that Geneva should return to the jurisdiction of the Pope. Geneva was faced with the difficult problem of replying and Calvin was requested to return to become the pastor of the city.

Some of Calvin's happiest days were spent at Strasburg. He married Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist who had renounced his Anabaptism under Calvin's preaching. He reorganized the French Church on New Testament lines and generally set in motion the proposals that he had earlier put before Geneva. He drew up a liturgy and prepared a psalm book of metrical translations. He worked on his commentary on Romans and his reputation as a biblical and theological scholar went far and wide. Calvin would have happily continued at Strasburg but with hindsight, it can be seen as a rehearsal for the strenuous days that were to come in Geneva.

Back to Geneva

Once again he was unwilling to return but did so out of a sense of duty. It was 1541 when he set foot again in the city. For 14 years Calvin had to struggle against opposition. The last nine years of his life 1555-1564 were less troublesome but he was never able to carry out the thorough reorganization that he had longed and prayed for. What he achieved was a thoroughly biblical and theological ministry from the pulpit with his systematic expositions of the Scriptures.

The great stain on Calvin's character was his involvement with the death of the anti-Trinitarian heretic, Servetus. Calvin was a man of the times but that does not excuse him any more than stating that the condemnation was a corporate decision. Calvin died in 1564, a widower, without any children. His only son had died at only a few days old. However, he had left behind a legacy of theology which, sharpened and systematized by his mind and with special features, was shared by many reformed churches, not least the Church of England.

3 Calvinism

What is the essence of Calvinism? That is an easy question to ask but somewhat difficult to answer. The term itself was not contemporary with Calvin and we may be quite sure that he would have repudiated it. In fact it is a seventeenth-century term, expressing the radical differences that existed between the churches of the Reformation and particularly some of the Dutch churches that were following the teachings of Jacobus Hermanus of the University of Leyden. Arminius' teachings were condemned posthumously by the Synod of Dort, a synod of the Reformed Churches at which the Church of England was represented by Bishop Joseph Hall of Norwich.

Calvin believed sincerely that the teaching he was setting out was neither more nor less than a consistent teaching of the Old and the New Testaments. This was the original object of the Institutes of Christian Religion sent to Francis I. Calvin, like Cranmer, was convinced that the biblical doctrines of the Reformation were not novelties but were the doctrines of the early and later Fathers of the church. A better term today for the Protestant Churches is Western Reformed Catholic, based on the teaching of Holy Scripture; the early Creeds and the traditions of the Fathers agreeable to the Word of God (see the 39 Articles of Religion).

Calvinism seeks to interpret all reality from the perspective of God in Christ (John 1:1-14). God reveals himself in Christ through the witness of the patriarchs, prophets and apostles (Heb 1:1-4). God has spoken finally and fully through his incarnate only begotten Son. The only Christ whereby we can truly know God is the Christ of the Scriptures in promise and fulfilment. There is no other way to the Father (John 14:6).

Calvinism has a high view of the doctrine of God and a very high view of man's creation and ultimate destiny in Christ. It also has a very strong view of man's total depravity and the appalling nature of his ultimate destiny in rebellion of unbelief against God. Calvinism teaches that man is God's creature whose ultimate and highest end is to serve God through all eternity. Man is to receive God's revelation by faith. Faith does not mean intellectual assent initially, nor is it a leap into the dark. It means to trust God's revelation in his word and through his Son.

This is not a recipe for a withdrawal to the contemplative life, nor is it mysticism as such. That does not mean that Calvinism does not have its religious experiences; it does but does not major on them. It is rather a recipe for reverent worship, for action here, for good works of every kind,

but it places no weight upon them for salvation, believing that when one has done everything, man is still an unprofitable servant. The Scriptures are the principle by which everything is regulated.

Because of man's total depravity, he can do no spiritual good by which he may earn God's favour. Man is spiritually dead until the light of the gospel shines into his heart in the face of Jesus Christ. However, paradoxically, that neither relieves man of responsibility, nor does it mean that he is to do nothing. There are Calvinists who go well beyond the teaching of Calvin.

Man is free yet bound, dead spiritually but alive psychologically. His mind is darkened but he is responsible to use his mind. He is to respond in faith to the gospel of Jesus Christ and when he has done so he finds that it is God who has predestined him to be conformed to the image of his Son. (One of the Reformers wrote a very sensible comment that you do not go to the University of Predestination until you have been to the Grammar School of Salvation.) Calvinism seeks to humble the sinner and to exalt the Saviour and to bring man to an end of himself so that he is ready to accept all that Christ has done for him in his incarnate obedience and atoning death on the Cross.¹⁷

The Christian then sees the need for gratitude to God in Christ to walk in the obedience of faith. His duty from the motive of grateful love is that having received the imputed righteousness of Christ by faith, his duty is the development of his natural and spiritual gifts for the benefit of society, the good of the church (edification, evangelism, mission) and ultimately to glorify the Triune God. Perhaps we may say that in a nutshell the essence of Calvinism is the Sovereignty of the Triune God in Creation, in Providence and in Redemption.

4 The Influence of John Calvin

We cannot trace the influence of John Calvin in detail but we can look at it under various headings.

National Churches

Geneva became a major centre of the Reformation, spreading along the Rhine Valley to Germany and Holland, along the Danube to Hungary and its surrounds. Calvinism crossed the Alps into France and spread to England as the refugees from the Marian exile (1553-1558) returned as Elizabeth I ascended the throne. It largely dominated the Church of

¹⁷ *Book of Common Prayer* Holy Communion Prayer of Humble Access

England into the seventeenth century. We should note the Lambeth Articles of 1598, nine propositions of a very strong Calvinistic persuasion drawn up by Archbishop Whitgift. From the time of James I of England a clash became inevitable with the Puritans and it led eventually to the persecuting policy of Laud under Charles I. Many Puritans left for religious freedom in New England.¹⁸

Immigrants from Germany, France and Holland also took Calvinism to America. Perhaps, we may be excused in believing that Calvin most probably had a very warm affection for the evangelization of his own country, France. He organized training for pastor preachers who, when trained, returned to their own country to proclaim the doctrines of the Reformation, preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified. Geneva also originated the concept of calling to the ministry of the Word as distinct from a vocation to the priesthood. The teachings of Luther had been disseminated through the country, but not until the French pastors returned, many of them dying as martyrs, did the French Reformed Church begin to grow apace.

To trace the development of this Church and its history of persecution amidst the manifold changes and chances of French politics would take us a long way from our purpose. The French Church with its Genevan theory of discipline put into practice was with Scotland the nearest approach to Calvin's ideal. John Knox, the fiery preacher, 'who dinged the pulpit into blades' carried the Calvinism of Geneva to Scotland and in spite of great opposition from Mary Queen of Scots brought about a major Reformation in the Lowlands.

World-wide Mission

From all these places Calvinism has spread out across the world in the great late eighteenth and nineteenth-century missionary movement. Its theology was the dominant theology of the Great Awakening in America and in the Evangelical Revival in England. It was the theology of the majority of the Puritan clergy and of George Whitefield, one of the greatest evangelists that the Church of England has ever known. It was the theology of Princeton and many of the American seminaries until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Political Movements

Because the Risen and Ascended Christ is King of Kings and Lord of

18 The Rev Peter Bulkley, Rector of Odell was such a one. Following Laud's persecution Bulkley left England in 1634 with a number of the congregation and founded the town of Concord, Massachusetts and the first church.

Lords, all creation will bow the knee to him. With this faith in Christ, Calvin has had tremendous impact on the political scene. In many ways, it created the democratic process and was responsible for the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when William and Mary came to the throne. The War of Independence in America was fought on the same premiss that if kings are unfaithful they must be removed because the Sovereign Lord is superior to them.

Natural Science and the Arts

Calvinism had considerable influence upon the development of natural science. Many scientists have held this position, believing that God upholds all nature according to his own Word. It has also produced biblical philosophers such as Abraham Kuyper and Dooyeweerd of Holland among many others.

Biblical Exposition

Calvin was a competent linguist and his method of interpretation in order to get to the mind of the writer was to deal with the text historically, grammatically in its context. This method of exegesis and exposition both in his preaching and writing has had a huge influence in biblical preaching far wider than the Reformed churches themselves. His object both in preaching and in writing commentaries was always to remember that the Bible is God's Word to man. Parker writes:

God does not address men in a direct encounter of Divinity with humanity but by means of creatures, creaturely events, creaturely communication. The Bible is a collection of documents recording the history of God's relations with men, and is therefore such a creaturely communication. In that they are documents, they are to be studied and understood only by the methods in which any documents are studied and understood. The creatureliness of the Bible is no hindrance to hearing God's Word but rather the completely necessary condition...God in his kindness, says Calvin, speaks to man in a language that he understands like a mother using baby talk to her infant.¹⁹

The Sacraments

If the Bible is God's Word spoken to us, then the Sacrament is the visible word that makes real to our senses the promises of God. Here we ought to note what is called the Comfortable Words in the Lord's Supper or Holy

19 T H L Parker *John Calvin* (London: J M Dent 1975) p 77

Communion of the *BCP*. These are four promises from Scripture suited to everyone's need in their Christian life. As the promise is believed so the visible sign makes that promise real to our senses in Christ by faith. Calvin writes: 'A sacrament is an outward sign by which the Lord represents and testifies his good will towards us.' Again he writes: 'The sole office of the Sacrament is to turn our eyes to beholding God's promises; that is they make the Word perceptible to other senses than the ears.'²⁰

We have no space to dwell on the sacraments generally but we need to turn to the question that agitated the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Roman and Protestant and between Lutheran and Reformed. The question itself is 'How do the bread and the wine become the Body and Blood of Christ?' It was the question that the medieval schoolmen had answered by adopting the Aristotelian distinction between *substantia* (substance) and *accidentia* (accident); better translated as 'essential nature' and 'sensible appearance'.

The Roman answer was transubstantiation. Luther answered it by a mild consubstantiation. Zwingli initially solved the problem by regarding the matter as entirely figurative, although he changed his mind later. Calvin wrote: 'How do we possess the whole Christ crucified and become partakers of all his blessings?' That is the real question and he answered that it was by faith through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The natural body of Christ is in heaven but the Spirit brings the blessings which means Christ gives himself to us and we receive him by faith and are strengthened (see Article 28 of the 39 Articles). This doctrine is known as receptionism.

The Church of England

Mary Tudor died in 1558, a disappointed woman. Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne and it became apparent that the restoration of Mary's reign was no longer to be maintained. Exiles flooded back from Geneva and Frankfurt and many other havens on the continent. The Calvinist contingent came determined to further the Reformation in the Church of England that had been overthrown over the last five years. Elizabeth was faced with a problem of a variety of church orders and opinions and although agreeing in the main principles, it was the detail that caused most problems. Elizabeth was an extremely astute woman who realized that if England were to survive she must go for the broadest consensus. Hence she froze the Reformation in the reign of her brother, Edward VI. The Puritan struggle for further reformation had begun.

20 T H L Parker *John Calvin* (London: J M Dent 1975) p 42

Conclusion

The Renaissance and Reformation must be seen in conjunction with one another. While the Renaissance was the rise of humanism, the Reformation was the restoration of the Bible to a central position within the church. Luther and Zwingli pioneered the way but Calvin established and fixed the Protestant doctrines. Humanism placed man at the centre of the Universe but the Reformation, especially through Calvin, sought to restore the Sovereignty of God in Christ. The rationalism of humanism and the Enlightenment is giving way to the irrationalism of post-modernism. The answer to irrationalism is to subject our human reason to God's Word written. This is the example of all the Reformers and especially Calvin. His influence has been far-reaching and incalculable, stretching from the sixteenth century to today. The fact is that we may love him, or hate him because he is a very large character leaving very little room for manoeuvre. Whatever the case, we cannot ignore his significance and his example should encourage us to trust the Triune God and to take him at his Word.

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