

# John Calvin: best forgotten?

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Calvin and his heirs have been blamed, inter alia, for capitalism, the rise of science, ‘Anglo-Saxon sexual repression, companionate marriage, liberal democracy, American exceptionalism and religious bigotry’.<sup>1</sup> Calvin excites high passion. A late academic colleague of mine, a singularly distinguished and humane professor of mathematics, would deliver himself of uncharacteristic venom at the mere mention of Calvin’s name. The death of Servetus and cruel fatalism of predestination meant that in his view Calvin would indeed be best forgotten for his legacy could be measured in repression, hatred and fear. But, if you are enjoying the benefits of capitalism (even in recession), value your democratic vote, and believe that the world is a rationally ordered place, then you are enjoying something of Calvin’s alternative heritage. In the small city of Geneva, in the middle of the sixteenth century, Calvin gave birth to a set of ideas and practices which helped shape the Western European tradition. Whatever our ultimate conclusion, he therefore deserves our attention as we remember his 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

John Calvin was born on 10 July 1509 in Noyon, the son of an ecclesiastical lawyer and administrator whose relationship with his cathedral clergy was never easy. He intended his son for the church, but his increasing difficulties with the chapter might have caused a change of heart. As Calvin later recalled, ‘Since I was a young child my father had destined me to theology, but later, having considered that the science of the law regularly enriches those who follow it, this hope made him suddenly change his intent. Thus this was the cause why I was withdrawn from the study of philosophy and put to learning the laws.’<sup>2</sup> So, in obedience to his father, he took himself to Orleans and Bourges in pursuit of the law. This was an extraordinary time to be a law student, for the study of law was being transformed by humanist techniques. Medieval philosophy was being replaced by a study of the texts of Roman law, the study of the meaning of their original Latin, and of the institutions of Roman civilisation. Calvin was fortunate to be taught by two of the finest expositors of that new science – Pierre de l’Estoile in Orleans, and the Italian jurist Andrea Alciati in Bourges.

It is important that we place his childhood and student years in context. Calvin was eight when Martin Luther issued his protest against indulgences in 1517. He grew up, therefore, in a frightening world in which the certainties of centuries were being dismantled across Europe. The Mass, the closeness of the communion of saints, the authority of priest and bishop, even the shape of the year (which was determined by the church’s liturgical cycle) were all being questioned. And as the power of the church waned, the power of the secular state waxed. Princes and rulers flexed their

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<sup>1</sup> John Coffey ‘Puritan legacies’, in John Coffey and Paul Lim (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge, CUP 2008, pp. 327-346, at p. 327

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Bernard Cottret *Calvin, a biography* (ET Edinburgh, T & T Clark 2000, tr. M Wallace MacDonald) p 21.

muscles. By the time Calvin was in his early twenties many of the city-states of Germany and Switzerland had 'reformed' their churches, and in England Henry VIII was severing the English church from its Roman moorings. Calvin didn't fashion this turmoil, he inherited it. Luther was 26 when Calvin was born. They belonged to different generations, even if they shared an intellectual heritage shaped by humanism.

Calvin imbibed from his studies the feeling for texts as literature, the fascination with language and its structures, the sense of history, and the compelling logic of legal argument which were later to characterise his mature Biblical exegesis and systematic theology. A singularly able mind was in formation, and he seemed set on an academic, humanist career – his first book (1532) was an edition of Seneca's De Clementia, a work on the boundary between legal and moral philosophy. Then something happened, and Calvin was converted. Calvin was a shy, self-effacing, modest man. He wrote about himself with the greatest reticence. His account of this moment was written some twenty years after the event in his 1557 preface to his Commentary on the Psalms – '...God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to progress therein, that although I did not leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.'<sup>3</sup>

What is remarkable is that within a very few years, he published a sophisticated work of systematic theology, the first edition of the Institutes of the Christian religion (1536), that exhibited a mastery of Biblical, patristic and contemporary reformation sources. The final edition of 1559 was to be five times the length of the first, but the first remains a tribute to the fine mind of a remarkable 25 year old. It was dedicated to the French king Francis I, and was at least in part an apology for the French reform movement, with which Calvin had now identified himself. It was published in Basle, whence he had fled for relative peace and safety as religious controversy rocked France. If he thought of a life for himself at all at this stage, it would probably have been as a wandering humanist scholar.

He was on his way from Paris to Strassbourg in 1536, but the most direct route was closed because of the war between France and the Holy Roman Emperor, so he had to make a wide detour south, planning, as he said, 'to pass by quickly, without stopping more than one night in the town.'<sup>4</sup> Few overnight stops have had such consequences. The General Council of the city of Geneva had accepted the reformation a few months earlier, at the hands of the French reformer Guillaume Farel and a Swiss pastor, Pierre Viret. The political reasons for that decision are complex, but for many Genevans, it was a way of gaining the freedom of their city from the control of the Duke of Savoy<sup>5</sup>. Farel was having an uphill struggle. Calvin's arrival seemed a God-send. He demanded 'as by a dreadful adjuration, as if God from on high had extended his hand over me to stop me', that the twenty-six year old Calvin should stay and help him

<sup>3</sup> Quoted Cottret op cit p.67

<sup>4</sup> Quoted Cottret op cit p.119 (Preface to Commentary on Psalms)

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account of the triangular political relationship between the Duke, the canons of Geneva Cathedral and the Senate, see - Naphy, William G. "Calvin's Geneva." The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin. Ed. Donald K. McKim. Cambridge University Press, 2004. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. 26 May 2009 DOI:10.1017/CCOL0521816475.002

cement the reformation of Geneva. It was a turning point in Calvin's life. He longed for the quiet, contemplative life of the scholar – thinking and writing. Yet he also knew that a hand had been laid upon him. He was being asked to abjure that for a very public, political, painful life. We can only guess at the inner turmoil, but the decision was made. The young scholar threw in his lot with the fiery, red-headed, hopelessly undiplomatic 47 year old Farel, and thus began a turbulent, uneasy, wearing relationship between Calvin and Geneva.

He and Farel were thrown out in 1538, caught in the crossfire of factional politics. Geneva's rulers were seeking the support of the city-state of Berne, and decided by Senatorial fiat that Geneva's ecclesiastical system should conform to Berne's. Calvin and Farel denied the state's competence to act in ecclesiastical affairs, and found themselves out of jobs.<sup>6</sup>

It must have seemed like a reprieve to Calvin. He wanted to return to his studies in Basle, but he let Martin Bucer persuade him to join him in ministry at Strassbourg, taking responsibility for the 500 strong French community. It was all that Geneva was not, and Calvin loved it. Whereas Geneva was a querulous, divided market town recently reformed, Strassbourg was a tolerant and gracious open city with over a decade of reformed life behind it. Whereas Farel was hot-headed and politically inept, Bucer was eirenic, shrewd and scholarly. Calvin learnt his craft from his older colleague. During this three year interlude he absorbed Bucer's theological and ecclesiological ideas, published his commentary on Romans, totally revised his Institutes, and established himself as a Protestant scholar of international repute, and married Idette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist. They had three children, none of whom survived infancy. Unlike Luther, Calvin was not given to wearing his heart on his sleeve. However, those who regard him as a cold, clinical, unemotional man would do well to note the depth of his grief when Idette died in 1549. In an unusually personal letter to Viret he wrote, '...truly mine is no common grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, who, if any severe hardship had occurred, would have been my willing partner, not only in exile and poverty but even in death...', and consoling a correspondent in similar circumstances, he wrote 'How deep a wound the death of your excellent wife has inflicted on you I judge from my own feelings, for I recollect how difficult it was for me seven years ago to overcome a similar sorrow.'

Strassbourg was a delight to him. In 1539 the Catholic reformer Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto wrote an open letter to the Genevans trying to persuade them to return to their traditional faith. The Genevan Council asked Calvin to respond, a measure of the respect in which they held him still, and he dashed off a small masterpiece, his Letter to Sadoleto. He too still felt bound to them – '...when [God] gave me [Geneva] in charge [he] bound me to be faithful to it for ever.'<sup>7</sup> In his absence things were going from bad to worse, but eventually a pro-Calvin group gained power and in 1541 they asked him to return, and he did. He was to remain there until he died 23 years later. He was, simply, the senior minister of Geneva, with more than a dash of bishop about him. It was a truly vocational act. He told Farel he would rather 'submit to a hundred other deaths' than suffer the cross of returning to Geneva.

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<sup>6</sup> Naphy art cit

<sup>7</sup> Michael Mullett Calvin (London 1989), p 30

But once back, he preached three times during the week, and twice on Sundays, more than 4,000 sermons in all (many of which were transcribed), produced various editions of his Institutes of the Christian religion (finalised in 1559), conducted a voluminous correspondence with the reformers of Europe, and set about the task of turning Geneva into a godly society.

Geneva was never going to be an easy pastorate. The struggle between church and state is a continual feature of church history, and it was played out in miniature in the towns and cities of Germany and Switzerland during the 1530s and 40s. Calvin was clear from the first that the church of Jesus Christ was not going to be a department of any city council. Its independence was to be jealously guarded. The city fathers, in turn, had no intention of being pushed around by a group of upstart, arriviste ministers. Calvin prepared a new constitution for the Genevan church, the Ecclesiastical Ordinances. The city council radically revised them. Calvin argued passionately for a weekly eucharist. ‘No’, said the city fathers. Calvin wanted ministers chosen by their colleagues. Only if they swear an oath of allegiance to Geneva replied the council. There was a border between church and state, but its precise location was unclear because everyone was a Christian, every citizen a member of the church – ‘As the magistrate ought by punishment and physical restraint to cleanse the church of offences, so the ministers of the word should help the magistrate in order that fewer may sin. Their responsibilities should be so joined that each helps rather than impedes the other.’<sup>8</sup>

All societies control the behaviour of their citizens. Across Europe there were laws against swearing and blasphemy, regulations controlling public amusements and private vices. Geneva was a small town of a few thousand inhabitants, parochial, intense, petty, yet alive with the tensions and difficulties that were sweeping across Europe. Calvin did not create its moral code. He inherited most of it.

John Knox famously called Geneva ‘the maist perfect school of Christ.’ If we are to understand what he meant, we need to attend to the Ordinances, which laid out Calvin’s understanding of how a godly society should work. First, they set out his understanding of ministry. It was fourfold. There were the pastors, ministers of the Word and Sacraments, whose job it was to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise pastoral care. Then there were elders, twelve laymen, vested with both civil and ecclesiastical authority, who would join the ministers in the work of the Consistory. Many of the judgements that historians have made about the severity of discipline in Calvin’s Geneva are having to be revised in the light of the publication from 1996 onwards of the records of the Consistory. There is no clear equivalent of the Consistory in our experience. It was partly a court, partly a version of Relate crossed with ACAS, partly a kind of adult catechetical class of last resort. In severe cases it had the right of referral to the city Council. It was equally interested in reconciling broken marriages and restoring peace between neighbours as it was in regulating levels of adultery and blasphemy. In one case, it refused to sanction the marriage between a 70 year old woman and her 25 year old servant because ‘...the servant wanted to take his mistress, nor for the principal objects of marriage, to have descendants or for reproduction of other comforts, but for riches. So that is not according to God.’ It would gently coax an elderly woman who was finding it particularly difficult to move from reciting the ‘Pater noster’ to the Lord’s Prayer in

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<sup>8</sup> Institutes IV.i.5

the vernacular, and as one scholar has noted, it ‘...had healing qualities and often led to amendment of life.’<sup>9</sup> It would not have worked had the majority of the population not had a predisposition to seek to live their lives according to the ten commandments and the teachings of Jesus. This was sixteenth century Geneva, not 21<sup>st</sup> century London. This was Christendom, and it must be judged accordingly.

If the elders and the Consistory were there to nurture the holiness of the community, the diaconate was instituted to carry on the work of caring for the poor. They were, as it were, the social welfare managers. They ran the hospital, which was the focus of care for the indigenous poor. They established and ran the Funds which could be applied to help the considerable number of refugees who sought sanctuary and counsel in Geneva. One of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s ancestors was one so helped in 1550. They employed people to care for the sick, to act as wet-nurses, and to give foster care. They ran a sort of micro-credit system with short-term loans to help set up small businesses.

Then there were the ‘doctors’, or teachers. Calvin inherited a well functioning education system, to which he eventually added a College for the training of ministers, the Genevan Academy, which was eventually to become the core of the University of Geneva. Doctors had a dual role. They were teachers within the educational system, but also those who ensured that true doctrine was taught in the church. Calvin considered himself a ‘doctor’.

Social welfare, education, religious observance and the regulation of behaviour within a generally accepted framework, provided the structure for the Genevan reformation. Constructing a godly society is a dangerous business because Pharisaism lies on the shadow side of the sermon on the mount, and few Christian social reformers have avoided its shadow, Calvin included. Yet, for all that, here was a city which cared for its poor, sought to avoid poverty, sought provision for the refugee, sought to reduce domestic violence and cruelty, provided a decent system of education, and nurtured the kind of liberalism that backed the liberty of children to resist forced marriage at the hands of their parents. It was far from all bad.<sup>10</sup>

Calvin’s ‘work’ was primarily that of the local minister, that ineluctable mixture of politics (with a small ‘p’), liturgy and preaching, pastoral care and management (with a small ‘m’). That was his stage, proscribed by the tides of fortune which swept Geneva and the wider flux of religious politics which brought half of Reformed Europe to his door in the 1540s and 50s. So, add to the local pastor and teacher a voluminous correspondence which reached to the far ends of the reformation’s reach. Geneva became an exemplar copied as far west as Edinburgh and as far east as Budapest and the Transylvanian plain.

Theologians and writers prefer not to lead eventful lives, because if they become too eventful the thinking is not done, and the books remain unwritten. Calvin was glad not

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<sup>9</sup> Olson, Jeannine E. "Calvin and social-ethical issues." *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*. Ed. Donald K. McKim. Cambridge University Press, 2004. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. 03 June 2009 DOI:10.1017/CCOL0521816475.009; for the specific case, Cottret op cit p.253

<sup>10</sup> Mullet op cit p.38, R.S.Wallace Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation (Edinburgh 1988) p. 15

to be a man of action. Had he been, he could not have re-directed the movement of Western theology. However, in 1553 he found himself caught up in what one historian has called ‘...an extraordinary saga of ecumenical viciousness’<sup>11</sup> Michael Servetus was a maverick anti-trinitarian Spanish theologian who hawked his ideas across reformed Europe, meeting (not unnaturally) re-buff after re-buff. A sane and sensible man who wanted to live would have kept his opinions to himself and his mouth shut. Instead he spawned pamphlets, books and disputations with almost reckless abandon. Oecolampadius threw him out of Basle in 1531. Bucer banned his work in Strassbourg. The Anabaptist Caspar Schwenkfeld thought his work bound for hell. Even Melancthon, who saw good in everyone, found him confused and fanatical. The Holy Inquisition had him arrested in Lyons and condemned him, but he managed to escape across the border, only to turn up in Calvin’s congregation one Sunday. Calvin had him arrested, and the Council condemned him to be burnt for heresy. Calvin pleaded for a quicker, more merciful form of execution but was refused.

The burning of a heretic was hardly novel in the sixteenth century. Mary Tudor executed some 273 Protestants who resisted her Catholicising regime between 1553 and 1558. In the 1560s the Duke of Alva put to the sword unknown thousands of Dutch Protestants in an attempt to control the Dutch reformation, and in 1572 10,000 French Calvinists were subject to a month of genocide. Of 139 people executed in Geneva between 1542 and 64 only 1, Servetus, was executed for heresy.<sup>12</sup> Eamon Duffy has recently re-visited the burnings of the Marian era, and his comments are germane, ‘The historian’s task is to explore that other country, the past, and to bring back news of how its people differed from, as well as resembled, ourselves. Confronted by the sanctified savagery of the Tudor age, it would be a hard heart that withheld pity from the victims or felt no indignation against the perpetrators. But indignation at the motives and action of the long dead is a poor aid to understanding.’<sup>13</sup> The sixteenth century feared the heretic as much as our world fears the terrorist. They threatened all that made for a civilised, decent, ordered life. For us one dead is too many, but in the annals of sixteenth century religious violence, Geneva stands out as a tolerant place, despite Servetus.

There are some figures in history who reach out from the sources as warm, loveable people who we can almost love. Within the history of the church I think Francis is one (although we would not have found him easy!) and Luther another. Luther was never happier than with a pint of ale in his hand laughing and joking with his students, unless with his Kate and their children. The joy and delight of the faith ripples through his writing. Calvin was in some senses his antithesis. Systematic rather than intuitive, a lawyer rather than a theologian, a pastor rather than a professor, self-effacing rather than self-promoting, wary of food lest trigger the migraine which plagued and almost ruined his life. Shy, reticent, powered by an iron will and a sense of vocation which overcame the crippling weakness of his body, his vulnerability is as impressive as his vivacity of mind. It is typical of the man that he insisted that he be buried in an unknown grave.

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<sup>11</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch Reformation: Europe’s house divided 1490-1700 (London, Penguin 2004) p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> John Witte Jr The reformation of rights: law, religion and human rights in early modern Calvinism (Cambridge, CUP 2007) at p 68

<sup>13</sup> Eamon Duffy Fires of faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor (New Haven, Yale UP 2009) p. x

But is he best forgotten? Does he have a legacy which is worth cherishing? Or is he simply trapped in the limitations of the 1540s and 50s? Of his theological heritage, as systematician, Biblical scholar and crafter of the Reformed tradition there is no doubt. But that is very 'churchy'. Why should anyone else remember him?

If Calvin were in a balloon debate, he'd probably be the first one over the side, but for all that, I think he would not be best forgotten. Let me suggest five reasons why. These are perhaps not the most obvious reasons.

#### 1) An economic heritage

One of the many sins laid at the door of Calvinism, by no less a figure than Max Weber, was that Calvinism smoothed the path for capitalism. This has been a highly controversial theory. What Weber claimed to have found was a correlation between Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, and enterprise. John Coffey sets out the case neatly. Calvinists were pre-occupied with finding out whether they were saved or not, and Weber thought that they '...sought assurance by living scrupulous and industrious lives, saving and investing their earnings, and finding evidence of divine favour in worldly success.'<sup>14</sup> Historians and economists have found countless holes in his argument, and most seem well capable of explaining the rise of capitalism in early modern Europe without recourse to Weber. They have found it less easy to evaluate his views of Calvinism. His sample was small, unrepresentative and Puritan, and there are many examples of Puritan businessmen who were so obsessed by spiritual concerns that they let their enterprises go to pot. Equally, the Puritan clergy, (like Richard Baxter) could be fierce in their denunciation of economic exploitation. But for all that, Weber had grasped something important about Calvin, and that is a sense of vocation and responsibility. In his Commentary on Genesis 2.15, Calvin noted,

'...the custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence: but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.'<sup>15</sup>

If stewardship is one element of vocation, then responsibility for the poor is another. In one of his sermons Calvin speaks of the poor as God's 'receivers'. When we put alms into the hands of the poor, we are placing them in the hands of God. This is all

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<sup>14</sup> John Coffey 'Puritan legacies' in Coffey and Lim (eds) *op.cit* pp 327-345 at p 328

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Holder, R. Ward. "Calvin's heritage." *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*. Ed. Donald K. McKim. Cambridge University Press, 2004. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. 03 June 2009 DOI:10.1017/CCOL0521816475.014

of a piece with the holistic vision of the Ecclesiastical Ordinances. Here then, is no selfishly acquisitive, accumulative economic system, but rather an economic vision that is built out of a properly theological rationale.

## 2) A sense of vocation

Calvin is best remembered (and most reviled) for theology of election and predestination. There is an antiquarian whiff to this debate for us, and we find it hard either to understand the issues or have much sympathy with the disputants. The fundamental theological presupposition of our age is that God is love, and our dominant image that of a loving parent, or indeed lover of humanity. In Calvin's day and for long after it, the overriding image was of God as sovereign and king, so the ways in which he exercised his rule were of considerable interest.

For all that, Calvin's theological thinking was never dominated by the concept of predestination. In fact, it occupied very little space in his published work. He was never comfortable with the idea – he calls it a 'labyrinth', an 'abyss', a 'mystery', and he shifts the piece around in his theological jig-saw. But he couldn't ignore it because it was part of the Biblical evidence he was exploring. According to the Bible we have to do with a God who chooses – Abraham to be the Father of the nation, Moses to be the liberator, Jeremiah, known before he was formed in the womb to be a prophet, Israel to be a light to the nations. 'You', Peter told the church, 'are a chosen race, a royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2:9), and Jesus tells his disciples, 'You did not choose me, I chose you.' (John 15:16) If the theme that Biblical, it was also a firm part of patristic and medieval theology. The first great treatment of the theme came from Augustine's pen as he struggled with the question of why some accepted the faith and others did not. He wrote of those elect to life and faith. Later medieval theologians like Isidore of Seville were not so squeamish. If some were elected to faith and life, the logical corollary was that others were elected to death and damnation. Calvin the good lawyer was never one to shy away from logic. But he hated where he ended up. He calls it a 'terrible decree', but he can do no other than face up to it.

Contemporary Calvin scholarship spends a good deal of time separating Calvin from the Calvinists. He was very careful where he placed the doctrines of election and predestination in the Institutes – it is to be found in book III where he deals with the ways in which people receive the grace of God. His followers were less fastidious, and his successor in Geneva, Theodore de Beze, made it part of his doctrine of God. From that point onwards the doctrine was to be mis-used and mis-applied in Reformed thought, often with catastrophic results. That is the subject for another paper. The question before us is Calvin's legacy. What can we take from this arcane series of debates that might be of use to us?

At the heart of the doctrine of election lies a profound understanding of the dignity of human beings and their purpose within God's creation. Scripture is careful to point out that election is not the result of a competitive examination in holiness. The most unlikely people are 'chosen', and their election is always to responsibility, to sharing in the mission of God. It is a liberation from spiritual striving. Salvation is not your work, it's God's, and you can trust God to do it. Don't worry, get on and do what you can for the kingdom. You are called, you are co-workers with God, a little lower than the angels. Value who and what you are.

### 3) Human rights

If you value your vote, if you appreciate some of the benefits of democracy, you owe something to Calvin. This is a contentious claim, but one that I think can be defended. Calvin was not the originator of the Western democratic tradition – its roots are much older, as Quintin Skinner has demonstrated. Yet Calvin made his own contribution to that tradition. He was legally trained. He understood the ways in which societies form their laws – indeed, he was asked on several occasions to draft civil statutes for Geneva, as well as formulating ecclesiastical law. We have seen something of that work as we have looked at the Consistory, a neat piece of church-state relating.

A recent study suggests three ways in which Calvin helped shape the democratic process. First, he ‘...restructured the liberty and order of the church’. He did that by creating laws for the church which defined the rights and procedures of the organisation and its officers, thus protecting it from interference by state law. However, the promulgation and reception of these laws created a sense of orderliness and orthodoxy which has marked Reformed churches from that day to this.

Second, he championed democratic practices within the church. Church officers were elected by the congregation, and delegates to Synods by their peers. Periodic meetings also allowed the opinions of the congregations to be voiced. Built in to this almost unnoticed is the willingness to change, to deal with abuses and malpractice, and to entertain the possibility of new ideas and new ways of doing things. This is an inherently progressive rather than conservative process.

Third, he urged that liberty be respected in the church – not just a freedom to worship, but a freedom from coercion in the discussion of matters of faith and discipline, free to elect officers, free to debate.

Those three elements were bound together in the development of a coherent ecclesiology, and they became determinative of the ways in which Calvinist churches developed in Europe and in the New World, and in doing so they played their small part in the evolution of modern democracy.<sup>16</sup>

### 4) The rise of science

Calvin was born into an age of anxiety, where old certainties were disintegrating. Beliefs, religious practices and patterns of ideas change slowly. He was therefore formed at least in part by that disintegrating world. It was a world which crackled with the electricity of holiness. It was generated by holy places like wells, and holy things which had been prayed over and blessed, and by shrines which by preserving relics of the saints helped link heaven to earth. But most powerfully and wonderfully, it was shaped by the elevation of the host during Mass, God himself made manifest in the very midst of everyday. The sacring bell would ring and the knee would bow. All of this was predicated on a belief in the immanence of God.

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<sup>16</sup> John Witte jr The reformation of rights: Law, religion and human rights in early modern Calvinism (Cambridge, CUP, 2007) pp 77-80

The Reformers thought this a fundamental mistake which confused God with the world. God and the world were not the same. God is God, completely other, not to be confused with his creation. He is 'immortal, invisible, God only wise / In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.' What was needed was a fundamentally new methodology of understanding God and the world. That was what the Institutes was intended to be. There are two sources for a proper understanding of the world, says Calvin, a knowledge of God and a knowledge of ourselves, and he includes the world and creation within that knowledge of self, for as far as he is concerned, the individual is a microcosm of creation. Knowledge of God is to be found within the self, and written into the structures of creation.

Of course, we are fallen creatures, hopelessly corrupt, so we've no chance of appreciating that without seeing ourselves and the world through the lens of Christ, which we gain through Scripture, grace and the sacraments. However, once we've put those glasses on, creation itself sings of the wonder of God. Astronomy, medicine, the natural sciences, were all paths into the '...secrets of divine wisdom'. Calvin, as it were, swung the devotional pendulum from the church to the world. The world was, he wrote, the 'theatre' of God's glory. The transcendence of God means that no space is sacred because God cannot be particularised, but because of that all space is sacred because it is infused with the rationality of God.

Later Calvinist thinkers, like Peter Ramus, began to picture the world using logic, literally using charts as a way of doing theology. It is not a huge step from a sense of a providentially ordered world to a rationally scientific view of the world, or indeed to a sense that that world can be captured visually by the artist. The roots of science are manifold, but maybe one of those little tubers began life in the pulpit of Geneva.<sup>17</sup>

##### 5) The quest for unity

Calvin belonged to a rhetorical age which had ways with invective that would have made Alistair Campbell blush. Some of the things Calvin writes about the Pope and the cult of Mary would turn your hair white. But that is far from the whole story. Last summer I did some work on Calvin's treatment of Mary. An analysis of his commentaries revealed that his invective was reserved for what he considered the wholly mistaken cult of Mary. But his language about Mary herself was warm and reverential to the point where good Protestant theologians might start to worry! The age was one which forced protagonists to rhetorical extremes. A careful reading of texts will try and look beyond that.

The earliest Reformed theologians thought of themselves not as sectarian thinkers, but as Catholic theologians who were part of a 'Protest'-ant movement. Calvin himself strove tirelessly to bring about unity until it became clear that all such efforts would be unavailing, affirmed the ecumenical councils in his writings and drew extensively on the work of the early fathers.<sup>18</sup> What mattered was continuity. From the first Reformed theology was, in that sense, Catholic theology, and the Reformed churches

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<sup>17</sup> William Dyrness Reformed theology and visual culture: the Protestant imagination from Calvin to Edwards (Cambridge, CUP...)

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, William Stacey and Leith, John Reformed Reader vol 1 (Westminster John Knox, Louisville 1993) p xxi

were the church catholic, properly focused, and in total apostolic continuity with the patristic church. To be Reformed was to be catholic.

The Reformed definition of the true church was simple and generous. It was to be found wherever the Word was truly preached and the sacraments properly administered. Even at the height of the rhetorical war between Romans and Protestants, Calvin could say, '...when we categorically deny to the papists the title of the church, we do not for this reason impugn the existence of churches among them.'

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In April 1552 Calvin wrote to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, noting that the fact that '...the churches are so divided, that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute amongst us...' was '...to be ranked amongst the chief evils of our time', and (he continued) 'So much does this concern me, that, if I could be of any service, I would not grudge to cross even ten seas, if need be, on account of it.'

So, is he best forgotten? He hated the very thought of a cult. He would not have wanted anyone to describe themselves as a Calvinist. That was one reason why he sought an unknown grave. He would have wanted us rather to rejoice in the name of Christ. But for all that, his contribution to the development of the Western world was considerable – a seeker after unity, a reacher after democracy, a believer in providential order, a spokesman for the dignity of the human being, a man with clear ideas about the ordering of the common weal. In all those ways, as well as his overt, professional theological work, he has helped shape our world. We should raise a glass, and be grateful.

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<sup>19</sup> Calvin, John Institutes of the Christian religion (Philadelphia, Westminster Press 1960) (ed. JT McNeil; tr. FL Battles) IV.iii.12

<sup>20</sup> as quoted in Vischer, Lukas Pia Conspiratio: Calvin on the unity of the church (Geneva, John Knox International Reformed Centre 2000) pp 29-30. This useful compendium brings together a wide range of Calvin's writings on unity.