

Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

Volume 58, No. 14 ■ July 3, 2009



John Calvin
1509-1564

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Calvin the Reformer (1509-1564)

What makes Calvin so popular still?

A special celebration will take place on July 10, 2009, for on that day churches and individuals around the world will remember the 500th anniversary of the birth of the great French reformer John Calvin. Ordinarily no one takes note of someone born five centuries ago. We consign such people to ashes and oblivion.

Yet that is not the case with John Calvin. Five hundreds of dust may cover his grave but not his memory. Rather he continues to be a figure that intrigues historians, challenges theologians, attracts sociologists, surprises economists, and gladdens publishers. Indeed, the last decades have seen the appearance of a steady stream of essays, papers, and books about this ancient man.

So what accounts for all of this fame and attention? What makes him so popular still?

That is a hard question to answer. It is hard not because there is nothing to say about him but because there is so much. Calvin was in many ways a multi-faceted reformer. Consider only the following:

Biblical reformer

The first thing that strikes someone who examines the life and work of Calvin is his immense literary productivity. His commentaries are many and deal with most of the books of the Bible. In a very careful, respectful, and scholarly manner he interacts with the biblical text. At the same time his comments are replete with references to both of the main biblical languages: Hebrew and Greek.

In the process some may complain that the remarks he makes are on the dry side, or that they are too scholarly, or too wordy. They would prefer to see more application and illustration. Be that as it may, no one who takes up the challenge to read Calvin will ever come away saying that he does not take the Bible seriously or do his utmost to unearth and apply what it has to say. Nor will they ever come away empty handed,

for there is always some truth expounded or some teaching explained to stir one's mind and fill one's soul.

Historical reformer

Although it is present in his commentaries too, a reading of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* brings one face to face with Calvin's many references to the fathers of the early Christian church and with the church controversies and issues of the past. Already very early on in his ministerial career, Calvin was involved in theological disputations and debates throughout Switzerland and beyond. What astounded many who witnessed these events and later commented on them is the extensive knowledge that Calvin had of the fathers of both the Greek and Western churches. Ambrose, Augustine, Irenaeus, or Tertullian, he could quote them all, and he often did.

The result of this is that Calvin's arguments are never superficial or speculative. He could and he did bring the weight of church history to bear on the issues of his day. Often the impression that one is left with is that when you are arguing with Calvin you are not just arguing with him alone but with the whole church of the past as well.

Doctrinal reformer

By means of tracts and treatises, as well as catechisms and forms, Calvin set forth his doctrinal views; however, there is no doubt that it is especially in his *Institutes* that one finds the most detailed and extensive treatment of what he believed and professed. In that most famous work of his, Calvin supplies us with a very systematic, thorough, and elaborate defence of Reformed doctrine.

At the same time it is good to realize that the *Institutes* was not a work of the spur of the moment but rather it represents the labour of a lifetime. Calvin wrote the first edition of it at a relatively young age

and thereafter he kept on coming back to it, adding and deleting, revising and correcting, almost to the time of his death. Indeed, it is a fascinating thing to read what the well-known Calvin scholar Ford Lewis Battles writes about the evolution of Calvin's *Institutes*.

Church reformer

In spite of Calvin's voluminous writings it would, however, be wrong to limit his influence to the study. Rather what Calvin learned from Scripture, church history, and church fathers spilled over into the church. His stress on biblical preaching shifted the focus in the worship services from the mass to the Word. He reformed and revitalized the church by moving it away from the rituals and inventions of the Roman church and back to the biblical elements of Word, sacrament, prayer, offering, and singing. He abolished the office of the priest and revived the biblical offices of elder, pastor, teacher, and deacon. He, just like Martin Luther, denounced the clergy-laity distinction and promoted the office of all believers.

Liturgical reformer

One area of Calvin's church reforming work that merits additional attention has to do with the area of worship or liturgy. It was during his Strasbourg years (1538-1541) that Calvin translated and adapted the liturgy developed by Martin Bucer, a fellow reformer and mentor. In it he stressed the following order of worship: invocation, prayer, confession, absolution, singing of the Ten Commandments, Scripture reading, sermon, singing of a psalm or hymn, and the benediction.

It should also be noted that Calvin was convinced that the Book of Psalms was the real and true songbook of the church. Hence he promoted its use vigorously and wanted to bring the churches of Geneva and the Reformation into line with the church of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the apostolic period. In 1539 Calvin compiled a book that contained eighteen psalms. These psalms were versified in French by Clement Marot and accompanied with musical notation. Later Marot came to Geneva and, together with Louis Bourgeois, added more psalms and hymns. Meanwhile, Calvin directed the process and added several hymns of his own composition to the Genevan version of the psalter.

Polemical reformer

Throughout his ministry Calvin was never afraid or hesitant to defend the Reformed faith against all critics and detractors. When Cardinal Jacopo Sadeleto wrote a letter inviting the citizens of Geneva to return to the Roman fold, it was Calvin who took up his pen and wrote his famous *Reply to Sadoleto*. When a



Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd., Winnipeg, MB

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Phone: (204) 663-9000 Fax: (204) 663-9202

Subscriptions: clarionadmin@premierpublishing.ca

Advertisements: clarionads@premierpublishing.ca

Website: www.premierpublishing.ca

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	Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada*	\$49.00*	\$ 81.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds	\$62.00	\$ 80.00
International	\$90.00	\$135.00

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Agreement No. 40063293; PAP Registration No. 9907; ISSN 0383-0438

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number of Anabaptist radicals championed the cause of soul sleep, it was Calvin who countered their views in his tract called *Psychopannychia*. When Pierre Caroli, a Protestant minister, accused him of Arianism, Calvin defended his belief in the Trinity. And so it went with countless others, such as Jerome Bolsec, Joachim Westphal, and Sebastian Castellio. Calvin's pen was rarely idle and his life was rarely without controversy.

Gentle reformer

I realize that in calling Calvin a "gentle reformer" I am moving into controversial territory, but still it is a point that needs to be made. For what is the common impression that people have of Calvin? Surely it is one of coldness, ruthlessness, and fanaticism.

No doubt some of paintings and portraits that we have of Calvin contribute to this. None of them exactly portray or depict him as a friendly and approachable person. The eyes, the mouth, the dress all make him out to be very intimidating.

In addition, there is no doubt that at least in his younger years Calvin had a temper and that it often came to the fore. As well when one reads some of his tracts in which he defends the faith and attacks his critics, the language comes across as strong, blunt, and almost offensive. The gentle forms of debate that we have today were unknown in Calvin's day by both him and his opponents.

Nevertheless, there was another side to the man. It is a side that not many know about. Still, it was there and it is illustrated and proven in a little known book written by Richard Stauffer called *The Humanness of John Calvin*. In it he quotes directly from Calvin's letters and shows him to be a loving husband, a kind father, a faithful friend, and a sensitive pastor. In short, there was a gentle side to him.

Political reformer

Moving from one little known area to another, it may also be said that Calvin had a political impact as well. Of course, this is not to say that Calvin wrote about politics specifically. Nevertheless, a careful reading of Calvin's works indicates that he had relevant things to say about the political realm and that any number of those things took root.

With regard to the ever thorny issue of church-state relations, Calvin made it quite clear that church and state occupy two different and separate spheres of activity and influence. He made this point especially in connection with his long struggle with the political councils in Geneva. Calvin consistently and constantly argued that the area of church discipline was beyond the jurisdiction of the state and urged the members of the various councils to leave it to the church to take care of the total spiritual welfare of the believers.

Another pressing political matter also had Calvin's attention and it had to do with the Christian's duty to obey tyrants. He said that political rulers must be obeyed as God's servants, but that in cases of dispute, God is to be obeyed rather than man. Furthermore, he added that in the final analysis wicked rulers will face the judgment of almighty God. And as for the matter of resistance or civil disobedience, Calvin insisted that it was the task of the lesser magistrates to protect the people and that it was up to them to lead the people if resistance proved necessary.

Social reformer

Just as Calvin never wrote a separate treatise on politics, so he also never wrote a separate treatise on social and economic matters either. Nevertheless, here again Calvin proved influential, for a careful reading of his commentaries indicates that he passes along many pertinent comments having to do with the areas of money, poverty, wealth re-distribution, interest rates, unemployment, state sponsored industries, property, salaries, and trade.

Those who have a particular interest in these areas as they relate to Calvin should consult a seminal work written by Andre Bieler called *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought* (Geneva, 2005). It will furnish you with wonderful, but also surprising insights into both Calvin's social and economic thinking.

Educational reformer

In June of 1559 Calvin founded the Genevan Academy and appointed to it many of the teachers and preachers who had been expelled from the city of Bern. Among these teachers was Theodore Beza who was made the rector and later became his successor. Things went well and in 1564 a building was erected which still stands in Geneva to this day as part of the University of Geneva.

This Academy was divided into two distinct divisions, one provided a more general arts education and the other specialized in theological education. Most of the students in the latter were foreigners and were greatly used by the Lord over the years to spread the teachings of Calvin to other lands. In time this Academy evolved into a university, but in its early years it was noteworthy for the impact that it had in advancing the cause of the Calvinist Reformation throughout Europe.

In conclusion what the above shows you is that Calvin was a man immensely gifted by God. Over the last five hundred years his teaching in many different areas has shaped and moulded our lives and also the life of the Western world. We have ample reason to be thankful to God for him and to hope and pray that in our rapidly secularized society his contributions to the faith will not be forgotten.



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The Faith That Was Once For All Entrusted



MATTHEW 13:52

“Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”

Jude 3b

What is faith? It doesn't take long for a Christian to find his answer. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Of course, we're expected to say this as Christians. But how many are able to say confidently that they have experienced this sort of assurance in their lives on a regular basis? Paul cautions us not to take a shortcut on this when he says in Romans 8:24, "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?"

I'm reminded of an example that was used to explain the difference between simply believing something to be true and actually having faith. The example was of a man who walked on a tightrope across Niagara Falls, pushing a wheelbarrow with his friend in it. He asked the spectators after he had gone out and back whether they believed that he could do such a thing. They all said: "Of course we believe you can – we just saw you do it." But then the tightrope walker asked: "Well, who is next?" Faith would be getting into that wheelbarrow!

You remember how our young children trusted us when we carried them down a flight of stairs. But it was quite different when we asked them to jump from the top of the stairs into our waiting arms. They had to learn to trust that when we said "Jump," we would also be there to catch them!

So there are those "not seeing" moments of faith that need to translate into certainty. The child has to overcome his doubt by saying to himself: "My scary and uncontrolled leap through the air will end with my father catching me." Also as Christians, our "not seeing" faith must come to the certainty that our heavenly Father is always there.

Many modern thinkers are skeptical of such a trusting faith. They imagine that it closes the mind to reason. Yet does their so-called scientific reasoning not require more "faith" in that they believe that something can come out of nothing?

Our faith starts with God. We believe that God is the one who created this world and who created us in it. Therefore it is reasonable to believe that He also continues to sustain us. The ideologies, philosophies, and religions of men, by emphasizing the importance of man's individuality, seek to take away the safe and secure foundation set by our heavenly Father.

We affirm that a true faith is worked in those who believe through the life-altering influence of the Holy Spirit. His medium is Holy Scripture, the words which He inspired. As this Holy Scripture is preached, it works to bring to personal faith all those whom God calls.

But because it is God who works this faith in our hearts, He intends it

to have a "once-for-all-entrusted" character. God is a God who unites the generations of his people in the truth of his Spirit. That is why when the believers in the early church were confronted by the ideologies of men under the influence of Satan, Jude urged them "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."

Paul also identified the importance of hanging onto that once-for-all-faith when he said in Galatians 1:8, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" What did Jude and Paul understand of the faith that made them speak as they did? Paul perhaps said it best in Ephesians 4:4-6, "There is one body and one Spirit ... just as you were called to one hope when you were called. . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Scripture teaches us in Psalm 46 that this God "is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." We believe that He is there for every occasion. Therefore we must contend for this same faith which kept secure those saints before us. For to know that they went forward in faith, trusting that God would be there "to catch them," gives the reassurance that He will be there for us as well. . . always.



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Calvin and the New Protestant Pastor

As Reformed believers, we are all aware of how Luther's rediscovery of the biblical doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* overturned centuries of Roman Catholic teaching about how believers were to achieve a right relationship with God. We are also aware of how the refusal of the Roman church to heed Luther's call to reform ultimately resulted in his break with Rome and the formation of the new Protestant churches. What is perhaps less well known, however, is that, in the wake of that separation from Rome, one of the most immediate and vexing challenges faced by the Reformers of the sixteenth century was the need to articulate a clear vision of what the new Protestant cleric would look like and to communicate that vision to the wider body of Protestant believers.

What needs to be remembered about the early years of the Reformation is that Luther's teachings about justification by faith alone, when combined with his notions about the "priesthood of believers," as well as his redefinition of the number and nature of the sacraments, had an impact on more than just the doctrinal life of the church. They also had a profound impact on matters of ecclesiology – that is to say, the way in which the church is both structured and functions as a

community of believers. And, at the very heart of those changes, lay a radical redefinition of the place and the function of the clergy within the Christian church.

Changes

To appreciate the depth of that change, we need to understand that, throughout the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic clergy had existed as a separate and elite clerical caste (or, put differently, if less accurately, a separate class) within Western European society. Both the secular clergy (those who served as priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes) and the regular clergy (those who served as monks) had occupied a unique and privileged place within the framework of European social and ecclesiastical life. Their hold on that privileged position was predicated on their possession of a unique and special relationship with God. And, in this respect, it was the possession and distribution of the sacraments (particularly the sacraments of penance and the mass) which elevated the medieval clergy above the ranks of the common believers. Ultimately, it was this exclusive ability to communicate and transubstantiate the Eucharistic elements of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, along with the power to

absolve the believer of the guilt and penalty for sin in the confessional, that formed the bedrock of clerical identity and function in the medieval church.

Luther, of course, changed all of this. In the context of the new Protestant faith, no longer was God to be encountered primarily in the mass. Now the believer was to communicate most intimately with God through the Word, in particular, the Word as it was proclaimed from the pulpit during the worship service. It was to be in the proclaimed Word, not the mass, that the crucified Christ was to be met, and the saving power of his sacrifice discovered. Further, no longer were the faithful to seek forgiveness by confessing their sins to and receiving penance and absolution from the members of the Roman Catholic clergy. Now the believer could obtain forgiveness directly from God, through prayer, solely on the basis of Christ's intercessory work.

All of these changes, then, had an enormous impact on how sixteenth century Protestants understood the need for and function of the clergy within the new Protestant churches. As such, Luther and the other leaders of the early Protestant movement found themselves faced with a lengthy list of questions from the laity about just how exactly they were to

understand and interact with this new breed of clergyman. For instance, if all believers were to be priests in their own right and all believers had the ability (even the duty) to read the Word of God themselves, why was there a continued need for any clergy at all? Further, if all believers were to be equal in the sight of God, how then, in the wake of centuries of inequality between the clergy and the laity, were Protestant believers to interact with the new Protestant ministers? Finally, what function would these ministers play in the daily life of the congregation and, perhaps most importantly, what kind of "authority" would they have over the laity? Simply stated, while the need for the existence of the office of minister might be self-evident to Reformed believers today, this was not at all the case for believers in the early years of the Reformation and many questions remained to be answered about this important task in the church.

Further, it soon became clear to Luther and the other Protestant leaders that the consequences of failing to swiftly and fully answer these questions were going to be quite grave. From the outset, Luther's Roman Catholic opponents had pointed out that rather than producing a homogenous body of orthodox believers, placing the Bible in the hands of common people and combining that with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was likely to result in heterodoxy on a grand scale as "each man did what was right in his own eyes." The brutal violence of the Peasants' Rebellion of 1525 (when the horribly exploited peasants of south-western

Germany fused Luther's teachings about the liberty and equality of the Christian man with their own longstanding social discontent), along with the emergence of the Radical Reformers (sometimes referred to as the Anabaptists) and the spectacular disaster that resulted from their seizure of the city of Münster, proved that these Catholic fears were not entirely unfounded. The leaders of the movement, including Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and Martin Bucer, quickly realized that there was a pressing need for some kind of ruling and interpretive office within the church, some means of promoting and maintaining orthodox belief – in short they were going to need a well defined and organized clergy.

The preaching was to be an intensely passionate affair

What I would like to suggest in this article, however, is that while the recognition of the need for a well defined and organized clergy became clear in the early years of the Protestant movement, it fell to the "second generation" of reformers to provide a sustained and meaningful attempt at answering these difficult questions. And, in this regard, no one did more to set out a vision of the pastoral office than John Calvin. It would be Calvin who most fully set forth a vision of what the new Protestant cleric would like and of what their duties and functions would be within the church; and it was Calvin who

most effectively and fully communicated that vision to the wider Protestant world. As such, in the remainder of this article I would like to provide a brief introduction to some of what Calvin had to say about the office and person of the minister.

Pastoral identity and function

In the first place, Calvin was very aware that the problem of providing a clear understanding of pastoral identity and function was a living issue in the church of his time. In the fourth book of the final edition of his *Institutes* (1559), he observed that: "In our time there has been great controversy over the efficacy of the ministry" (4.1.6). He was also aware of the fact that this controversy was fuelled by, on the one hand, those who exaggerated the dignity of the minister "beyond measure" and, on the other hand, those who desired to have no clergy at all and to rely solely on the Holy Spirit for guidance (*Institutes*, 4.1.6). It is also important to note that the resolution of this issue was so important to Calvin that it was a topic which figured regularly in his preaching. In a sermon on Titus 1:7-9, for instance, Calvin informed his listeners that: "Christians generally ought to understand what is requisite in a good minister." He expressed his feelings even more strongly in a sermon on Deuteronomy 5:23-27, where he remarked that: ". . . it is imperative to recognize what kinds of prelates and doctors God sends us." Calvin was deeply aware of the currency of this issue and he laboured in both his scholarly work and in his preaching to inform people about it.

Importance of the office of minister

The second thing to note regarding Calvin's thoughts about the ministry is that it is almost impossible to overstate the importance he assigned to this office in a healthy and well organized church. In many ways, for Calvin, the minister was the "lynch pin" on which the entire functioning and survival of the church depended. This becomes clear as early as 1543 when, in the edition of the *Institutes* which Calvin published in that year, he compared the ministers to the *nervi*, that is, the nervous system of the church.¹ Perhaps his most famous statement about the importance of the ministry can be found in the final edition of the *Institutes*, where he wrote: "For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink are so necessary to nourish and sustain this present life, as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth" (4.3.2).

Why should this be the case? What would motivate Calvin to value office of the minister so highly? To answer this question, we need to understand that Calvin firmly believed in the maxim of the church father Cyprian that the church was the "mother" of all believers and that outside her walls there could be no salvation. Further, Calvin believed that the primary way in which the church "gave birth" to believers was via the preaching of the gospel message. As such, he envisioned the church as the repository of the divine truth of the gospel message and he believed that she had been given this precious treasure not as a "talent" to be buried in the

ground, but as a treasure to be worked with so that the gospel might be spread and thereby all of God's children could be safely gathered into his Fatherly care and protection. Further, he believed that the task of dispensing the gospel message had been divinely assigned to the ministers of the church. Calvin made this clear in his *Institutes*, where he stated that the "preaching of the heavenly doctrines has been enjoined upon the pastors" (4.1.5). In summary, for Calvin: the church as the mother of believers had the task of proclaiming the gospel message in order to gather in the elect children of God; this was to be accomplished by the proclamation of the gospel message, a task that God had entrusted to the ministers.

Calvin insisted that the ministers remain constant and humble students themselves

Therefore, no ministers meant no preaching; and no preaching meant that no one would be saved; and if no one was saved then the divine decrees and will of God would be thwarted and the sacrifice of Christ would be rendered ineffective.

The preaching of the Word

If the preaching of the Word was so central to both the process of salvation and to the task of the minister, what did Calvin have to say about how the ministers should carry out that all important activity? To begin with, when Calvin spoke of the minister's work as a preacher,

his most ardent and impassioned discussions focused on the need to bring the pure and unexpurgated gospel message. For Calvin, the most serious mistake that a minister could make was to mix the profane with the divine in the preaching. The good and faithful pastor was never to proclaim his own thoughts, beliefs, or ideas from the pulpit, but only to deliver the pure Word of God. In his discussion of this topic, Calvin often employed the two particular metaphors: that of the minister as master builder or of the minister as architect. In either case, he cautioned ministers that if they were to avoid the pitfall of mixing human fancy with divine decrees, they had to take care to stick closely to "plans" they had been given. That plan of course was the revealed will of God in the Bible. In commenting on the activity of the super-apostles in 1 Corinthians, Calvin reflected on how deviation from this plan could cause the entire project to collapse and the souls of the faithful to be placed in jeopardy.

Calvin was not only concerned that the gospel message be brought in purity; he also demanded that it be brought in its entirety. He was very clear that ministers were not to exercise any editorial license when it came to Scripture. They could not, on the basis of their own inclination, or in the face of pressure from either members of their congregations or the civil authorities, edit out of the gospel anything they or anyone found to be unpalatable. Calvin did acknowledge that the proclamation of the complete Word of God was going to cause problems from time to time, insofar as ministers who proclaimed the totality of God's Word were not

always going to be well received. The devil, he said, knowing the importance of preaching to the salvation of souls, would raise up enemies from both inside and outside the church who would resist this kind of preaching.

The preaching was also to be impassioned. Calvin spent time considering not only the content of the preaching, but also its form – the manner in which it was delivered. He began by noting that the minister had to take care to accommodate himself to the capability of his audience. The wise teacher, he claimed, would pitch his message at a level that was accessible to them – neither reaching too high for them to follow, nor remaining so simplistic that they would not benefit from the message. In this regard, Calvin recommended that ministers begin with first principles and gradually increase the depth and complexity of their preaching as their audience matured.

In connection with this principle of accommodation, Calvin also insisted that the preaching be simple and clear. He had several things in mind here. The preaching was not a place for ministers to involve themselves in highly technical theological debates, or to present matters of strictly academic speculation. Further, the preaching was not an opportunity for ministers to engage in dazzling displays of their oratorical virtuosity. The language and content of the preaching were to be simple, clear, direct, and accessible to the members of the audience. It was the Word itself, and not the knowledge or rhetorical skills of the minister, that was to take centre stage.

All of this, however, should not obscure the fact that, for Calvin, the preaching was to be an intensely passionate affair. Calvin recognized that if the gospel message was to be proclaimed effectively, it would have to reach hearts as well as minds. It would not only have to convey truth, it would have to motivate people to embrace that truth and to live it out. In this respect, Calvin's humanist training and education played a key role in his understanding of the preaching.

*The laity were to arrive
eager and ready to listen
to the Word of God*

The exact details of this humanist education need not trouble us here, but let me say for the moment that to be a humanist in the sixteenth century, or at least to employ the methods of the humanists, did not mean, as it does today, that one had a belief in the power and potential of man. Rather, to be a humanist meant that one subscribed to specific kind of pedagogy (that is, a specific methodology of learning). Further, the humanists of the sixteenth century had a great belief in the power of language; they believed that when language was used correctly, when it was passionately employed, that it could do more than simply convey information or truth. They believed that it could also motivate people to shape their lives according to that truth, to live out in real and practical ways the information that they had received from the

speaker. Calvin was deeply informed by this belief and it shaped the manner in which he preached personally and the manner in which he advised others to preach. Thus, as one of Calvin's biographers has pointed out, Calvin aimed to be "hot" not cold in his preaching and he insisted that the cool detachment of scholarship was entirely unsuited to the task of preaching.²

Ministers and the laity

Calvin, then, had established the centrality of the preaching in the process of salvation. He had also called upon the ministers to proclaim the full and pure Word of God, and to do so in a powerful and passionate fashion. As a final note, then, what did he have to say about the relationship between the ministers and the laity? How were they to interact with each other in the course of day to day life?

The best way to describe the manner in which Calvin envisioned this relationship working itself out is to speak about what I have chosen to call a spirit of "mutual teachability." Now, the concept of teachableness, as it was understood by Calvin, is a complicated one about which historians and theologians have had a great deal of debate. However, without becoming too concerned with that debate at the moment, what can be said about this idea of mutual teachableness at a general level?

In the first place, one of the key metaphors which Calvin used to describe the worship service was to refer to it as the "classroom of God." Now, as in any classroom, there will be both teachers and students – both with mutual rights and obligations regarding each

other. In Calvin's analogy, the ministers were the teachers and the laity were the students and there were clear guidelines that governed the relationship between them. What were the rights and duties of the ministers as the teachers in God's classroom? Calvin began by noting that as the "school masters," it was axiomatic that the ministers be effective teachers who could connect with their students. Further, as we have already noted, as good teachers they were to instruct their students in the complete and pure gospel message. Of tremendous importance, however, was Calvin's insistence that the ministers remain constant and humble students themselves. They were, he claimed, to set an example for their students by being ever willing to continue learning and to receive instruction themselves. Calvin taught that, even though they were school masters in the house of God,

Are we doing enough to ensure that our ministers have the time and focus they need to research and write their weekly sermons?

the ministers were to present themselves as those most ready to be taught. As such, they were to readily receive instruction from the Word of God, the doctors of the church, their fellow ministers, and finally, and I think quite notably, from their own students. To support this claim that the ministers had to also be ready to learn from the laity, including the members of

their own congregations, Calvin pointed to the willingness of Apollos to receive instruction from Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:26).

What were the responsibilities of the students, that is the laity, in the classroom of God? Calvin began by commenting on the attitude with which the laity ought to approach the worship service. They were to arrive eager and ready to listen to the Word of God. Calvin also cautioned the laity that, as in any classroom, students who showed themselves to be inattentive or disruptive pupils should be prepared to be rebuked and called to account by their teacher. Further, in a manner similar to his demand that the ministers not pollute God's Word with the introduction of human teachings or fancies, Calvin insisted that the laity also divest themselves of any preconceived notions of their own. They were to attend the proclamation of Word not as those who had already determined in their own mind what was right and wrong, but as those ready to learn directly from the Word what they ought to believe and how they ought to live. In this respect they were to receive the preaching as if it was God Himself speaking directly to them. This did not mean, however, that the members of the congregation were to receive what was delivered to them from the pulpit passively or uncritically. Calvin insisted that that the laity be active and involved listeners, listeners who evaluated the preaching against the yardstick of God's Word. In this, Calvin promised believers that they would not be left on their own, but that they would be aided by the labours of the Holy Spirit Who would bear witness to the Truth in their hearts.

This was to be the relationship between pastor and layman. A relationship in which each was prepared to learn from the other at the appointed time and in which both were aided by the Spirit in presenting and submitting to the Word of God. Each party was to hold the other to the standard of God's Word and to call the other to account if there was any deviation in either life or conduct. This was the mutually teachable state in which the ministers as shepherds and the laity as sheep were to exist.

Conclusion

Much more could be said about Calvin's understanding of who the minister was and how he was to function in the community. Calvin's understanding of the relationship between the ministers and the earlier offices of apostles and prophets could be examined. We could speak of the kind of character traits and abilities that Calvin believed were requisite in those who held the office of pastor.

Are we as congregations seeking to grow in our ability to listen and to learn?

We could also talk about how Calvin believed that the ministers of the Word were to interact with each other. At this juncture, however, I would like to conclude by considering what we as present day Reformed believers could learn from what has been presented above.

In the first place, if we consider the central role that Calvin gives to

the preaching in bringing about the salvation of God's elect, perhaps we should ask ourselves if, as churches, we are doing enough to ensure that our ministers have the time and focus they need to research and write their weekly sermons. Given that the proclaimed Word of God is the manner in which He has chosen to break hearts, to change lives, to instruct us as if it was with his own voice, can we afford as believers to let our ministers become distracted from this central task upon which our salvation and growth as believers so deeply depends? Instead, ought we not to ensure, particularly those amongst us who are elders, that our ministers have ample (and dare I say uninterrupted) time for study and reflection?

Secondly, there is a challenge here to the laity to renew our commitment to come to the worship services ready and eager to listen to the Word of God. And that means properly preparing to be good and critical listeners. As part of this process, it is crucial that, already outside of the worship services, we need to be people who daily live in the Word. How else are we going to be able to recognize whether the message we hear from the pulpit is in accordance with God's will unless we are deeply and intimately familiar with that will? There is an added responsibility here that falls upon the elders of our churches to be especially watchful in this regard. It is their

task to ensure that the congregation is being fully and effectively fed. They will have to pay extra attention to not only the content of the sermon, but also to manner in which the sermons are delivered. They will have to determine if the Word is being effectively conveyed to the congregation and if the sheep are receiving that Word and working with it. To that end, elders ought to familiarize themselves, at least to some extent, about how a "good" sermon is to be written, organized, and delivered. Only then will they be able to effectively assist the ministers with meaningful sermon critiques and reviews.

In line with this challenge to be good and engaged listeners, there is also the challenge to be listeners who continue to mature in their knowledge and ability. Paul warned of the dangers of believers not being weaned from the milk of the gospel and advancing to eat more solid food. Calvin echoed this warning when he advised the ministers to "pitch" their sermons at a level which their congregations could handle. However, he also urged ministers to "raise the bar," so to speak, as their audiences matured. Are we as congregations seeking to grow in our ability to listen and to learn? Are we providing our ministers with an audience that is gradually able to handle increased depth and complexity in the preaching? If not, perhaps we need to think about

what we should be doing to change this state of affairs.

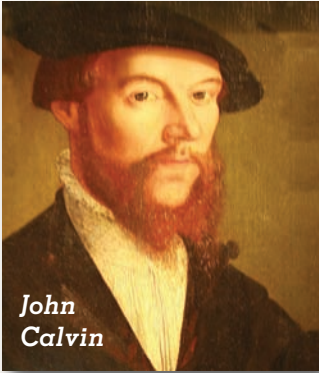
Finally, there is also a challenge in what Calvin had to say about the minister's task to seek after passionate preaching. Now I don't want to suggest to you that Calvin would have gone all "Southern Baptist" here and started calling out from the pulpit for a Hallelujah in the house! Calvin was above all a man who sought to respect the holiness of God and the sanctity of worship – he placed a remarkable premium on the concept of decency and good order. However, I think that if he were here today he would tell us that the dichotomy which Reformed believers have sometimes drawn between good, doctrinal preaching and animated and passionate preaching is a false one. I think that he would tell us that the best preaching combines both of these qualities and that preachers should be called upon not only to convey the truth of gospel, but to also embody in their preaching the emotion and joy of living within the comfort of that gospel.

¹ Cornelis Augustijn, "Calvin in Strasbourg," in: *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, ed. Wilhelm Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 172.

² William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 114, 116, 125-126.

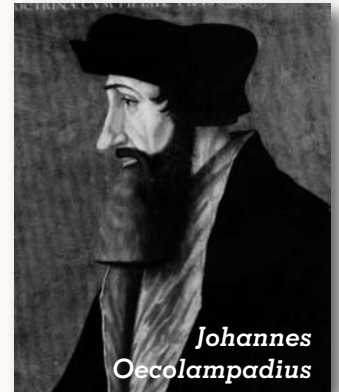


Timeline – John Calvin



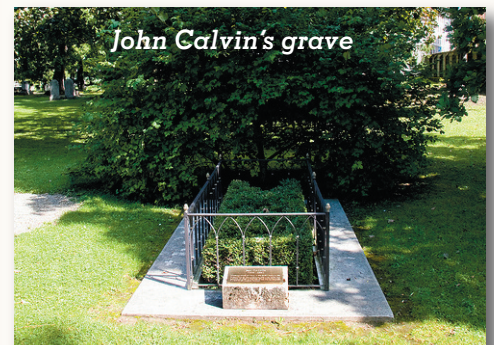
- Born on July 10, 1509 in Noyon, France
- In 1525 or 1526 he was a student of law at the University of Orleans
- In 1529 he entered the University of Bourges, learned Greek and sometime thereafter was converted to the Reformed faith
- In 1532 he receive his licentiate in law and published his first book, a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*

- In 1534 he was forced to leave France due to his anti-Roman Catholic activities
- In 1536 he lived in Basel, Switzerland and came under the influence of the reformer Johannes Oecolampadius
- In March of 1536 Calvin published the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- Sometime in 1537 he arrived in Geneva, stayed due to pressure exerted by William Farel, and was selected to be a "pastor"



- From 1538 – 1541 Calvin lived in Strasbourg, came under the influence of Martin Bucer, and married Idelette de Bure, a widow with two children
- In 1541 he returned to Geneva and ministered there until the end of his life
- In 1542 Calvin published his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*
- The years 1546 – 1553 were filled with opposition culminating in the death of the Spanish heretic Michael Servetus
- On March 29, 1549 his wife Idelette died

- The years 1553 – 1564 were years of consolidation and peace
- In 1558 Calvin wrote the final and most comprehensive revision of the *Institutes*
- On May 27, 1564 John Calvin died





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Calvin's Teaching on the Image of God

In 1517, when Martin Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses in Wittenberg, Germany, John Calvin was a young lad of eight years old, living in Noyon, France. He grew up in a Roman Catholic family. His father, Gerard Calvin, worked as a lawyer for the local priests and bishops. Later, when it was time for young John to begin his college education, his father sent him to Paris. There he began to hear about a new teaching that was coming out of Germany: the "Lutheran heresies," as the Catholic Church called them.

Yet over time and with careful study, Calvin became convinced that Luther's teachings were not heretical but rather the holy truth. In fact, he not only came to believe this truth; in due time, he became an ardent preacher of it. He also became one of the foremost leaders of the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century. One of the doctrines which Calvin sought to bring in line with Scripture was the creation of man, both male and female, in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Below is a short survey of what Geneva's preacher taught on this topic, followed by some implications for our lives today.

The *Institutes*

In 1536 Calvin published the first edition of his most well-known book, the *Institutes*. In that publication he writes about our creation in God's image as follows:

In order for us to come to a sure knowledge of ourselves, we must first grasp the fact that Adam, parent of us all, was created in the image and likeness of God [Gen. 1:26-27]. That is, he was endowed with wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and was so clinging by these gifts of grace to God that he could have lived forever in Him, if he had stood fast in the uprightness God had given him.¹

So, Calvin's basic line of teaching was this: God is infinite wisdom, righteousness, and holiness and at creation human beings reflected this same basic list of attributes. There were, of course, crucial differences. While God's attributes were infinite, the same attributes in humans were only finite, and while God possesses these things in and of himself, humans received them as a gift. At this point in his life, Calvin also taught that this most excellent image of God "was

cancelled and effaced"² by the fall into sin.

After more than two decades of refining, Geneva's reformer sent the final edition of his *Institutes* off to the press in 1559. Had his views changed in any way? Concerning the image of God at creation, the mature Calvin writes that human beings are "the noblest and most remarkable example of [God's] justice, wisdom, and goodness."³ Essentially that is same as what he wrote in 1536. Concerning the effect of the fall on the image of God, he explains: "Now God's image is the perfect excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection, but was subsequently so vitiated and almost blotted out that nothing remains after the ruin except what is confused, mutilated, and disease-ridden."⁴

Obviously, Calvin's position in 1559 is more nuanced than it was in 1536. He still teaches total depravity. And yet, in some way, something of that original image of God lingers after the fall. It is "almost" – not utterly – blotted out. What does Calvin mean by this? To answer that, we must explore some of his other writings.

Preface in Olivétan's Bible

One year before the first edition of the *Institutes*, in 1535, Calvin, wrote a preface to a new French translation of the Bible, produced by his cousin, Pierre Robert Olivétan. He speaks about how sin had ruined God's image and then he continues:

And just as God had set and ordained him so that he might take delight and pleasure in him, as a father [takes delight] in his very dear child, so now, to the contrary. . . that which he had viewed with a benign and fatherly eye, he now detested and looked at with regret. In short, the whole, entire man, with his faculties, his deeds, his thoughts, his words, his life became totally displeasing to God, as if he had become his special enemy and adversary, to the point that it is said that God was sorry that he had made him.⁵

Thus, at an early stage in Calvin's development as a theologian, there was a connection between being created in the image of God and being children of God. Sadly, though, beloved posterity became a brash adversary; *that* is the horrible tragedy of the fall into sin.

Sermons on Genesis

In his preaching Calvin also emphasized this connection between being created in God's image and being created to be God's children. For example, when he turned to Genesis 1:26, Geneva's preacher began his sermon with the following words:

It is true that he [God] could have created him [Adam] first, but he kept this for the end. And why? Because before he was created, he wished to provide

him with what was required and necessary. Even an [earthly] father will not wait until his child comes into the world, but when the time draws near for his wife to give birth, he will provide what is necessary for the child. When a father has the means, he will buy swaddling clothes and all the rest. In a similar way, then, God did not wait until man was created to provide for his nourishment and clothing, but beforehand he filled the earth with good and rich things. . . .⁶

Then, a little further on in this sermon, Calvin comes straight to the point and explains to his congregation:

But when it is said here that "man must be created in the image of God and according to

Calvin emphasized the connection between being created in God's image and being created to be God's children

his likeness," it is for the purpose of declaring that he must have such virtues and gifts, which will serve as signs and marks, to demonstrate that the human race is as the lineage of God, just as St. Paul proves with the saying from the pagan poet in 17th chapter of Acts: "we are his descendants."⁷

At this point we can pull together the *Institutes*, the preface to Olivétan's New Testament, and the sermons on Genesis. When speaking with family or friends, we sometimes exclaim, "like father, like son!" These familial

similarities are not exclusively physical ("his face is a carbon copy of his Dad's") but can also be mental ("he thinks along the same lines as his father") or dispositional ("he's just as compassionate as his Dad was"). Since God is spirit there is no physical likeness between Himself and Adam and Eve. However, at creation, there was a strikingly splendid spiritual similarity: as the Father is righteous, holy, wise, and good, so He also gave those attributes to his created children (cf. LD 3). Like Father, like children: so it was in the original excellence of Eden!

Commentary on Psalm 8

However, that leaves one question yet. Why did Calvin modify his description of the effect of the fall, so that by 1559 he wrote that the image of God was "almost blotted out" by the sin of our first parents? The best answer to that question can be found in the reformer's comments on Psalm 8. He provides a list of things which can be found in unbelievers:

The reason with which they are endued, and by which they can distinguish between good and evil; the principle of religion which is planted in them; their intercourse [or: interaction jvv] with each other, which is preserved from being broken up by certain sacred bonds; the regard to what is becoming, and the sense of shame which guilt awakens in them, as well as their continuing to be governed by laws; all these things are clear indications of pre-eminent and celestial wisdom.⁸

For example, an unbeliever may have a strong conviction that a husband should remain loyal to his wife. Sometimes we say, "My

neighbour does not believe in Christ, but he is a very moral person." Well, that general sense of duty and morality, says Calvin, is a remnant of the image of God. It is *not* a springboard by which unbelievers can launch themselves into the blessing of eternal salvation. However, it is something which preserves civil order in society (cf. CD III/IV 4).

Implications for today

Through catechism preaching and catechism classes, we learn that because of Adam and Eve's sin we are "totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil" unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God (LD 3). At the same time, in the daily course of life, we may meet some people who do not believe in Christ and yet they are such decent, honest, compassionate, and helpful people. How do we square this with the doctrine of total depravity? Here is where Calvin offers us practical help. As this reformer explains, the decent and compassionate unbeliever is not partially or semi-regenerate. Instead, what we notice in them is a remnant of the original image of God. However, that remnant serves as a testimony to the splendour with which our Creator made us in the beginning. It does not provide the unbeliever with some kind of preliminary credit of everlasting righteousness before the holy God. On the contrary, as the fathers of Dordt would say later, it only leaves him "without excuse before God" (CD III/IV 4).

At the same time, Calvin's teaching on the image of God

highlights the warm, paternal love of our Lord. As a wise Father preparing in advance for the creation of his children, the Lord Almighty took six days to make everything necessary for the well-being of Adam and Eve and their descendants. Instead of giving God their gratitude, though, our first parents tossed all the Father's good gifts aside. They treated God as their enemy, not their Abba.

That remnant of the original image of God serves as a testimony to the splendour with which our Creator made us in the beginning; it does not provide the unbeliever with some kind of preliminary credit of everlasting righteousness

By nature, we are no different and no better. Yet in his infinite mercy, the Father has adopted us, as his very dear children, for the sake of his only-begotten Son through the power of the Spirit of adoption. By grace, we are restored to that state in which we were originally made: children of God. Once again, through the eternal Son of God, it is like Father, like children. And this is but the beginning. "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness, with

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Rev. W. den Hollander

of Bethel church, Toronto, Ontario.

Examined by Classis Ontario West on June 17th, 2009 and declared eligible for call:

Candidate Rodney Vermeulen

Called by the church of Surrey, British Columbia:

Candidate R. Vermeulen

ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18).

¹ Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 Ed.*, trans. F. L. Battles. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 15

² *Ibid*, p. 16

³ Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.15.1

⁴ *Ibid*, 1.15.4.

⁵ Calvin, J. "Épître à tous amateurs de Jésus-Christ" in *La vraie piété: Divers traités de Jean Calvin et Confession de foi de Guillaume Farel*, eds. I. Backus, and C. Chimelli, (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1986), pp. 25-26; translation mine. Concerning the last phrase of this quotation see Gen 6:7.

⁶ Calvin, J. *Sermons Sur La Genèse Chapitres 1,1 - 11,4. Supplementa Calviniana*, ed. M. Engammare. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), p. 54; translation mine.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 57; translation mine.

⁸ Calvin, J. *Calvin's Commentaries*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), Vol. 4, p. 102.

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***The Reformation:
How a Monk and a Mallet
Changed the World.*
Stephen J. Nichols, Wheaton:
Crossway Books, 2007**

**Additional Information:
Paperback, 159 pages, \$16.99**

The Reformation is part of our heritage and thus it's only fitting that we should know something about it. Unfortunately, church history has not always been taught well, nor has it always been written about in the most engaging ways. In his book, *An Unexpected Journey*, W. Robert Godfrey wrote about one of his professors, "Dr. Spitz used to say that history is so inherently interesting that one has to work very hard to make it dull. He would then add that many historians are very hardworking." By that token, Stephen Nichols is a slouch and it's a very good thing! We can be grateful for his fun and interesting overview of the Reformation.

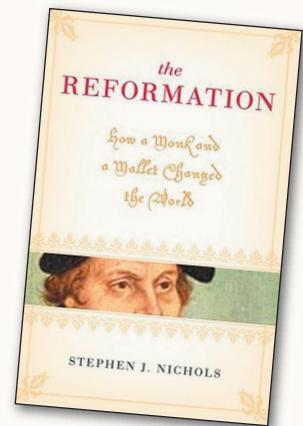
Nichols holds a Ph.D. from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and teaches at Lancaster Bible College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His book is a brief, readable look at the key persons and events which God used to bring about reform in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Included are the predictable chapters on Martin Luther and John Calvin, but there are also some surprises, like a chapter entitled, "Women in Black Too: The Untold Story of Women in

the Reformation." Nichols has a great writing style and a wicked sense of humour that makes the book an easy and enjoyable read. For instance, writing about the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, Nichols tells us of how Zwingli tried to find a wife:

While the Reformation was about politics, it wasn't all about politics. It was first and foremost about theology. An invitation came to Zwingli to speak at the Oetenbach Convent. Zwingli accepted, perhaps thinking he might find a wife. After all, Luther married a former nun. Maybe this would be yet another way that Zwingli's life and career would follow Luther's template. So, what would impress these now eligible nuns? A lecture on hermeneutics, of course. Zwingli miscalculated. He returned to Zurich a bachelor, but only for a bit, until he met Anna Reinhart (p 46-47).

Nichols gives many more such engaging tales.

Overall, I really like this book, but to recommend it, I also have to mention one big misgiving and some smaller ones. The smaller ones have to do with historical and typographical errors. For instance, on page 77 Nichols relates that Calvin believed the "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 to be all referring to the 150 Psalms of the Old Testament. Wrong – read Calvin's commentaries and you'll see that this was not Calvin's view, though it did come to be the view of many of his followers. Elsewhere,



in one of the appendices, Nichols says that Calvin wrote a catechism in 1642. Of course, Calvin wasn't writing anything in 1642 because he'd been dead for seventy-eight years! There are several such typos and errors in the book.

The more serious problem has to do with Nichols' inclusion of a chapter dealing with the Anabaptists, treating them as if they were part of the Reformation. In an appendix, "Confessions of the Reformation," he includes the Anabaptist Schleithem Confession. The Reformers would go apoplectic to see all this. Just a read of the Belgic Confession would lead one to recognize that the Anabaptists were regarded just as much enemies of the gospel as the Roman Catholics. Nichols may just as well have included a chapter on the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation and included articles from the Council of Trent in his appendix of Reformation confessions. I don't know if it has to do with the fact that he teaches at an institution in the heart of Mennonite country, but his take on the Anabaptists should be read with circumspection. So, as mentioned, this book is recommended, but with a couple of "reader beware's" added.



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John Calvin and the “Frenzied Spirits”

John Calvin was not a man to mince words. He said it as he saw it. He delicately called Roman Catholics “Papists.” He also dared to call the Pope “the Antichrist” (*Institutes*, Book II, page 384 as translated by Henry Beveridge and published by Eerdmans, 1966 edition). I suppose that if we talked in those terms today, we’d be severely castigated.

Like Calvin, the Westminster Standards also speak of the Pope as Antichrist (Art 25). Other creeds have followed the viewpoint of John Calvin. The Belgic Confession does not make specific statements in this regard. But for Calvin the Pope is the Antichrist.

This does not mean that John Calvin wrote off every Roman Catholic Church or believer. He did not deny that there are “churches” or believers among the Papists. He writes, “The question we raise only relates to the true and legitimate constitution of the Church. . . .”

To put it differently, there is a difference in judging institutions and persons. There are sometimes still true believers in a false church. It is good to keep this truth in mind when reading the powerful statements of Calvin.

The Anabaptists

The Reformers did not only have to deal with the Papists but also

with the *Anabaptists*, who denied the validity of infant baptism and decreed that only believing adults were to be baptized. Calvin refers to them as “frenzied spirits” (*Institutes*, Book I, page 529). This is a rather remarkable designation.

The word “frenzy” denotes a state of agitation that borders on madness. Anabaptists are usually very vocal and eager defenders of their fallacy. A few sentences later Calvin states that it is necessary to restrain their *fury*. Anabaptists are frenzied and furious. They are not easily restrained and cause great disturbance in the church.

Perhaps Calvin (as others in his time) felt compromised by the Anabaptist movement that became violent and revolutionary. The first Anabaptists in the time of the Reformation did not hesitate to take up arms. This gave the Reformed churches a bad name, for they were often wrongly equated with the Anabaptists. In the Belgic Confession, therefore, great care was taken to avoid wrong associations (see Belgic Confession, Article 36).

The violent Anabaptist movement was later pacified under Menno Simons. Hence we use the name “Mennonites.” Still, the doctrine of the Anabaptists remains. These are

not cute and harmless people but “frenzied spirits.”

Denial of infant baptism

Every now and then in the churches Anabaptism rears its ugly head. As in the days of Calvin, this heresy must be calmly and clearly exposed and refuted. This is especially the case when it comes to the denial of *infant* baptism.

Those who have been baptized as infants, according to these heretics, need to be re-baptized as adults upon their public profession of faith and personal commitment to Christ. Hence we speak of *Anabaptism*, being baptized *again*.

Calvin ardently defends the truth and right of infant baptism. It is not a human invention (as Anabaptists suggest) but is founded “on the institution of God.” Calvin makes clear that the sacrament of baptism is based on “the divine promises” of God. It is a sign of God’s covenant which promises and demands new life. Baptism, like circumcision before it, stresses that salvation is a matter of God’s *grace*. He calls the Anabaptists “*furious madmen*” who do not cease to assail the holy ordinance of God.

The attraction of Anabaptism

The question may be asked: what attracts people time and

again to the "frenzied dreams" of the Anabaptists? I cannot find another reason than "human pride and obstinacy," as Calvin states.

Anabaptism is attractive to people because it focuses on their own works and merits and relieves men from living *by grace alone*. Calvin states that Satan seeks to rob us of the singular blessing of confidence and spiritual joy and so to detract from the glory of the divine goodness. God's love and mercy are being torpedoed.

By having people reject infant baptism, Satan seeks to erase the "attestation of divine grace which the promise itself presents to our eyes." It needs to be said and repeated that the heart of every heresy is a denial of God's sovereign grace. Instead of praising God for his mercy, we are told to dig deep within ourselves for evidence of new life.

Calvin writes about the attraction and force of infant baptism. "For it is no slight stimulus to us to bring [our

children] up in the fear of God, and the observance of the law, when we reflect that from their birth they have been considered and acknowledged by Him as His children. Wherefore, if we would not maliciously obscure the kindness of God, let us present to Him our infants, to whom He has assigned a place among His friends and family, that is, the members of His Church."

Calvin's life is best remembered by studying his legacy.



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