

# The Reformation: John Calvin at 500

*Romans 3:19-28*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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The official calendar of the Presbyterian Church annually designates the last Sunday of October as Reformation Sunday. For those churches that follow the liturgical church calendar, this day is set aside to focus upon our theological and ecclesiastical heritage – where we came from and why.

Throughout my years of ministry, however, I have rarely spent much time in a Sunday morning sermon focusing on the events that led a group of religious reformers to split from the Roman Catholic Church 500 year ago. I usually save that for a church school class or Elder training. But today I thought it would be helpful to intentionally focus upon some of the many contributions that the Protestant Reformation has made to our understanding of God, ourselves, and the role of the church and clergy.

In the interest of time, however, I will primarily hone in on the contributions to the Protestant Reformation made by John Calvin, who came along a generation after Martin Luther. Why focus on Calvin? As I have mentioned a few times over the past several months, **this year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the French lawyer to whom we Presbyterians trace our roots back to when he became a pastor and theologian, teaching and preaching in Geneva, Switzerland.**

In order to mark the importance of this special birthday, the Theology, Worship and Education office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) threw a big conference in July of this year called the Calvin Jubilee. In preparation for this huge event, the Director of the Theology, Worship and Education office of the PC(USA), Joseph D. Small, wrote a paper entitled, *Calvin in America* and submitted it to the *Bulletin of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches*. Small begins by stating what may be obvious to most of us:

Many Presbyterians greet news of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth with a yawn, or a roll of the eyes, or even a derisive snort.

Why are we so dismissive of our forbear in the Reformed tradition? Lutherans adore Martin Luther. Methodist hearts are strangely warmed by John Wesley. Anglicans even have a contemptuous fondness for Henry VIII. But Presbyterians are uncertain about John Calvin and his legacy.

But we do not need to put Calvin on a pedestal in order to appreciate the ways in which his perspectives on Christian faith and life have shaped Reformed churches throughout the world, and continue to shape our churches today.

Renewed appreciation for his contributions grows from a revival in reading Calvin, rather than relying on superficial (and inaccurate) images

of Calvin the dictator of Geneva, the father of capitalism, or the gloomy advocate of predestination.

For just as there is a difference between Jesus and the followers who came after him, there is a difference between John Calvin and his followers, called Calvinists. But there are several things we can trace directly back to Calvin – especially his emphasis on **the importance of education**. He once wrote, “doubly fools” those “who do not deign [consent] to learn, because they think they are wise enough.” [*Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 50:4, p. 54.] Thus, Calvin established schools for Geneva's children and youth, and he taught Scripture and theology daily.

Speaking of Scripture, while Calvin thought it was central to preaching and Christian education, he did not view the Bible as a collection of facts to be learned or propositions to be mastered. In one of his delightful images, he likened Scripture to a pair of eyeglasses: “Just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused.” [*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.14.1, pp. 160-161.]

In other words, **we study the Bible not for its own sake, but because Scripture helps us to see God more fully, ourselves more honestly, and God's Way in the world more clearly.**

So during this Jubilee year in the United States, Joseph Small suggests four areas of Calvin's legacy that are particularly important sources for the renewal of church life:

- 1) Calvin's commitment to the unity of the church,
- 2) Calvin's conception of the ordered ministries of the church,
- 3) Calvin's conviction that the church must be engaged in the welfare of society, and
- 4) the primacy of grace in Calvin's theology.

Let's look briefly at each of these four areas.

### 1) Unity:

Calvin has the reputation of a firebrand who rejected the Catholic Church with enflamed rhetoric and bitter criticism. There is no doubt that his censure of the Catholic Church and its practices was pervasive, yet his purpose was always reform, not separation. He ranked the disunity of the church “among the chief evils of our time.”

This insight is especially important here in the United States, where church life is characterized by easy satisfaction with denominational proliferation, acceptance of market-oriented church competition, multiplication of church splits, and antagonism toward ecumenical efforts to shape meaningful forms of church unity.

I was shocked to learn, and I think you will be too, that there at least forty-five Reformed denominations – twenty-two of them Presbyterian! – are strewn across the American landscape. **Calvin is a resource for church unity, not an excuse for church division.** So it's important to remember that to be truly reformed means not getting stuck in the 16<sup>th</sup> or any other century. In each age, God calls people to be faithful in the context in which they live. **Funny how the very thing that gave birth to the Presbyterian denomination, breaking from the status quo, is something that stretches us to the limits of our unity today.**

## 2) Ordered Ministries:

This basically means the structure of our polity – how we govern ourselves. Among the great Reformers, John Calvin was the strongest proponent of a representative form of church government that vests power in elected governing bodies (like sessions and presbyteries) rather than in individuals, like bishops and the clergy.

This clearly reflects Calvin's distrust of the authoritarian power wielded by the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

Reformers, therefore, sought to protect the church against the potential abuses of clericalism – that means people like me.

Calvin, like Luther before him, was a strong proponent in the biblical concept of the “**priesthood of all believers.**” In other words, all people have direct access to God, and all people are called to works of ministry.

Some, though, are called by God to **specific types of ordained ministry**, which in the Presbyterian Church includes ministers of word and sacrament, elders, and deacons. Yet even among these ordained positions, **there is to be no hierarchy, just a call to different types of service.**

Joseph Small adds the following criticism, however:

**American Reformed churches have preserved the form of Calvin's vision, but lost the substance.** Too often, deacons [which our particular congregation doesn't have], are reduced to providers of polite services within the congregation, elders are transformed into congregational boards of directors, and pastors assume the role of CEO's. When this happens, church members then become consumers of religious goods and services while pastors become religious entrepreneurs.

Rediscovery of Calvin's vision for the church is central to its renewal, engaging deacons, elders, and pastors in collegial leadership of congregational service.

## 3) Social Righteousness:

Calvin's actions in Geneva join his writings, teaching, and preaching as powerful testimonies to the church's responsibility for economic and social justice in society. His theological understanding of creation, providence, and redemption, together with his ecclesiological understanding of the church's role in the social order, became concrete in his commitments to education, health care, refugee relief, employment, fair lending practices and more. Sounds remarkably modern, doesn't it!

**Any separation of theology and ethics – the putting our faith into action – would have been foreign to Calvin's comprehensive thinking about Christian faith and life.** In an America too often characterized by the assertion of competing rights, Calvin addresses the Christian community – those who know God as creator and redeemer – providing the church with new insight into its social vocation.

**Calvin speaks to the church, so that the church can bear witness in society.** In other words, we are to concern ourselves with addressing the needs of the society around us, instead of separating ourselves from the world.

#### 4) Grace:

In an America typified by self-reliance and self-assertion, Calvin's emphasis on grace is liberating. Rather than anxious striving that sets us over against others, we are set free from all calculation about the adequacy of our lives and the depth of our belief.

Calvin's point was simple: **neither what we do nor what we believe can justify our lives; neither is it a precondition to God's love.** Calvin stresses that **gratitude** for the grace of Christ liberates us for thankful response to God's unrestricted love and frees us for gracious relationships with other people. As men and women who know the grace of God, we no longer need to make calculations about the worth, power, or ability of other people as a precondition for our love. Following Calvin, we too can live grace-filled lives as we, too, love freely and unreservedly.

Let me describe now just a few **practical implications of grace.** Because of God's grace, we are set free from the need to be someone we are not, free from living according to other's expectations of us, free to accept ourselves for who we are – because we are already accepted by a loving God, a God who frees us to be ourselves. **If God accepts you and me, shouldn't we, then, accept ourselves?**

Because of God's grace, those times when old insecurities and feelings of inferiority and self-contempt that have imprisoned us are suddenly dispelled – such is a moment of grace.

You and I are constantly surrounded by God's grace. So look for it, listen for it, and sometimes when you least expect it, it is as though a voice whispers in your ear and deep within your heart a profound "YES" to your life. That's how the great 20th Century Swiss/German theologian, **Karl Barth, explained grace and salvation - a divine "Yes" to your life!**

So know deep within your being that you are loved, you are affirmed, you are set free. Accept it, embrace it, trust in it, and let it make a difference in every aspect of your life. This reality allows us to stop trying to earn God's love and forgiveness. **For true grace is just that, a blessing freely given by God, not a reward for something we have done or believed.**

The richness of our Reformed tradition leads us to the understanding that when it comes to God, it's all about grace.

Happy 500<sup>th</sup> Birthday, and thank you, John Calvin!

Amen.

Resources:

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