

## ***Reform School: John Calvin and the Christian Life***

*This is the second message in a four-part series of sermons offered for the glory of God in honor of John Calvin's 500<sup>th</sup> Birthday (July 12, 2009). They are intended to illustrate the connections between our Reformed faith and the Bible.*

**A Sermon Preached by  
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor  
Second Presbyterian Church,  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania**

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

*2 Timothy 4:1-5 NRSV*

John Calvin turned 500 on Friday. But who cares?

Theologians do. They want to understand the man from whom over 75 million Christians in 107 countries in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches have descended, spiritually at least. But that's not why we're looking at John Calvin's life today.

Political scientists care about Calvin because he helped establish a system of governance in Geneva, Switzerland, that became a model for modern democracies around the world. In fact, in France, the country of his birth, Calvin is studied as much for his *political* insights as his *theological* ones. But that's not why we're looking at his life today.

Church historians are celebrating Calvin's 500<sup>th</sup> birthday this year because he is the link between Martin Luther – who merely intended to correct abuses within the Roman Catholic Church – and the founders of literally dozens of Protestant and Reformed communions throughout Europe. Calvin systematized and popularized Luther's key insights and in so doing paved the way for the Reformation to be not just a *revision* but a *revolution* in the way Christians lived and worshipped. But that's not why we're looking at his life today.

Economists are fascinated with Calvin because an unintended consequence of his writing was a major contribution to the rise of modern capitalism. When Calvin was born at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Europe was still caught up in a feudal system of indentured servants and privileged land owners; in contrast to the existing order Calvin spoke about the dignity of all forms of labor and allowed the loaning of money at interest when it would benefit an enterprise. Even the famous “Protestant work ethic” has been traced back to Calvin. But that’s not why we’re looking at Calvin’s life today.

No, we’re looking at Calvin’s life today to see what it reveals about a Christian life burning white-hot for God. In Calvin we see what it can look like to be totally committed to God and guided by God’s Word. How you and I follow God might look different, but many of the themes that echoed throughout Calvin’s 53 years may yet resonate with our own lives 500 years later.

Calvin, of course, has quite a reputation. He is often described as harsh, severe, judgmental, humorless, and despotic. (And those are the *nice* things some critics have to say about him). To a large extent this reputation is well-deserved. Calvin was an intense man for a serious time. Europe was in the midst of massive cultural change and Calvin perceived himself as called by God to help bring order to the ensuing political crisis and clarity to the growing theological confusion.

Calvin saw that Europe’s new “protesting” or “protestant” Christians were essentially sheep without a shepherd. In railing against the corruptions and the abuses of the Catholic Church as it existed at the time, Luther had told people what they *shouldn’t* believe and how they *shouldn’t* worship; Calvin took upon himself the awesome task to outline what they *should* believe and how they *could* worship, Biblically and faithfully. In so doing he laid out a system of theology that has become the benchmark for almost all Protestant thought today.

He was indeed deeply flawed. He was prone to anger and notoriously stubborn. When it came to opposition he had little patience. His passion for order and his respect for authority meant that he had few qualms about excommunicating those people in his church or city whom he felt were unworthy of the church’s fellowship. And, at times – dozens of times by one estimate – excommunication was followed by *execution*. Calvin *was* definitely a man of his times. Desperate situations called for extreme measures, and tolerance was simply not perceived as a virtue in Calvin’s day.

And we can’t blame Calvin for what his followers did in succeeding generations. Everyone from Puritans to Presbyterians traces their lineage back to Calvin, and he gets the rap for everything from the Salem Witch trials to American workaholicism. But, as we’ll see, Calvin wasn’t exactly a Calvinist. The man is quite different from the myth. The simple truth is that Calvin was an ordinary flawed human being with extraordinary gifts and an abiding passion for God.

He was born in 1509 to middle-class Roman Catholic parents in provincial France. His father originally prepared him for life as a cleric, but changed his mind and

steered John toward law. While studying at the Sorbonne in Paris, Calvin became aware of the work of Martin Luther. Among other things, Luther taught that salvation is a gift of faith alone (and not a reward for good works) and that scripture alone is the measure of spiritual truth (and not decrees handed down by the Pope). Calvin was also influenced by an academic movement that called for a return to ancient sources when studying a subject. This meant studying the Bible not just in its translated form but reading it in the original Greek or Hebrew. [Note: To this day, Presbyterian pastors are unique in being required to learn both Greek and Hebrew]. Essentially people were interpreting the Bible for the first time *for themselves*. It was during this time of study that Calvin converted from Catholicism to what he would have called an “evangelical” – or gospel-oriented -- faith. Today we would call it “protestant,” or more specifically, “Reformed,” faith.

He intended to make a quiet life as an academic in Strasbourg, Switzerland, but a detour and an unintended overnight in Geneva led him to become the pastor-teacher-leader of the church there. His life reminds me of the old saying: We plan; God laughs. The key to Calvin’s life was that he was willing to listen to what God was saying to him through the sacred laughter.

Calvin spent most of the remainder of his adult life in Geneva, managing the city the church, and his own private affairs – as best he could – by the Word of God. Under his guidance Geneva became something of a shining city on a hill. Evangelical Christians from around the world came to Geneva, often fleeing persecution from Roman Catholic authorities. Many of these people, including a Scotsman named John Knox, took what they learned in Geneva back to their home countries and established “Reformed” or “Presbyterian” churches there. John Witherspoon, a Scotsman and a leader of the American Revolution, whom we heard about last week, was one of the young pastors schooled in the Presbyterian way of thinking in Knox’s Church of Scotland; when Witherspoon and other Scottish pastors came to America they brought Presbyterianism with them. That’s how we Americans from the small town of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, can claim a Frenchman as our spiritual forebear – by way of Switzerland and Scotland.

Calvin’s confidence and conviction were born of his faith in God and in God’s calling; they didn’t come from a high opinion of himself. He was nothing if not humble. When Calvin was made the subject of praise, he was quick to point out his flaws to others so that they wouldn’t think too highly of him. In doing so he wasn’t just being polite. He genuinely wanted God to receive all the glory for anything he accomplished.

Calvin was often misunderstood in his day, and even more so in our own. It didn’t help his reputation that he said things whether they were popular or not. He took Saint Paul’s words to Timothy to heart, and was so committed to what he saw as the Gospel truth that he spoke it no matter the consequences. At one point his commitment to speaking the truth – however painful -- got him thrown out of Geneva. But a few years later the citizens called him back. Calvin was loathe to return to the city that had rejected him. In May of 1540, he wrote to a friend regarding the invitation:

*I read that passage in your letter, certainly not without a smile, where you show so much concern about my health, and recommend [returning to] Geneva on that ground. Why could you not have said, [try] the cross? For it would have been far preferable to perish once for all than to be tormented again in that place of torture.”*

Calvin went anyway.

He believed that when God calls that call trumps our personal preferences and concerns. He also believed that sometimes God speaks to us through the voice of God’s people. He wrote to a colleague about his decision in August 1541,

*... when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord . . . . [W]henever I am at a loss for counsel of my own, I submit myself to those by whom I hope that the Lord himself will speak to me.*

Presbyterians today still believe that God speaks to groups as well as to individuals. That’s one of the reasons why pastors, elders, and deacons in a local church are called by the entire congregation and not appointed by an individual.

Calvin’s decision to return to Geneva was typical for him. His personal motto was *‘Cor meum tibi offero, Domine, prompte et sincere,’* which means, “Here, Lord, I offer my heart promptly and sincerely.” Calvin’s personal crest illustrated this prayer: it included a picture of a burning heart in an outstretched hand. For Calvin the Christian life was a life of service in gratitude for what God has done in Christ Jesus. For him, discipleship begins not with good intentions of helping others or with specialized Biblical training, but with offering God one’s heart, i.e., one’s passions, dreams, and hopes. Calvin daily offered God his heart without reservation and without expectation of reward. Calvin was not frightened into this act of devotion; he was awed into it. When he considered the beauty, strength, and generosity of God the only possible response he could imagine was total devotion.

Calvin had a deep sense of urgency about his life and calling. So many of us feel like we’re just trying to get through another day; Calvin believed that he was, quite literally, on a mission from God, and that there was no time to rest. He took his work very seriously. He wrote commentaries on several major books of the Bible, preached several times a week (with each sermon lasting an hour or more), and presided over Geneva as it doubled in size. Even on his death bed, when his friends counseled rest, Calvin is said to have replied, “. . . And have the Lord find me idle when he comes for me?”

He cared deeply about the people, both for their *souls* – he wanted them to know God in God’s splendor – and for their *sewers* – he recognized that public health was a faith issue, too. Calvin was one of the first theologians to see that the gospel had social justice implications. He saw the condition of the poor in his community and knew that Christian had to do something about it. It was said, “There are no beggars in Geneva,” at

a time when beggars were everywhere else in Europe. There were no beggars in Geneva because Calvin ensured that the local government, guided by Christian principles, provided food for them.

More than anything else Calvin wanted to help ordinary people to see what it means to fall in love with God and live for him every day. Calvin's most enduring written work is his *Institutes*. It is standard reading in *seminaries* today, but Calvin intended it as a tool for Christians *of all backgrounds*. In it we see how Calvin saw God: not as a tyrannical judge, weighing our good deeds against our sins, but as a loving father, a wise and generous king, a fountain of overflowing grace. These images are echoed in words of the only existing hymn attributed to Calvin:

*Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness,  
No harshness hast Thou and no bitterness;  
O grant to us the grace we find in Thee;  
That we may dwell in perfect unity.*

I Greet Thee, Who my Sure Redeemer Art (PH 457)

*That's* the strong and gentle God Calvin sang about and to whom we entrust our children when they are baptized. *Calvin-ists* later preached about "sinners in the hands of an angry God," but that's not the God Calvin gave his heart to.

A few years before his death the citizens of Geneva belatedly made their pastor a citizen. And to this day that great city reveres the man who shaped it profoundly. Monuments to Calvin are scattered all around it, and he is seen as something of a founding father despite the fact that it pre-dated him by more than a thousand years. Calvin, of course, would have been embarrassed – and disappointed – by all the fuss that's been made over him. In fact, he was buried in an unmarked grave – at his request – precisely so that his followers wouldn't make a shrine of it.

Presbyterians do not idolize Calvin; we can, however, learn a great deal about the Christian life from his life.

- In Calvin we find a man with courage to speak the Gospel truth even when it is uncomfortable. These days many people want to hear what God can do for them; Calvin taught people what they can do for God.
- In Calvin we find an example of the Christian principle that we serve God by serving God's people. If we really love God we'll roll up our sleeves and help the lost and lonely children of God around us.
- And, finally, *Calvin's* life begs these questions of *our* lives: To whom have you given your heart? To God or to someone or something else? And, if it's to God, have you given it to him *completely*? And *willingly*?

At the end of the nineteenth century the great evangelist Dwight Moody said, "The world has yet to see what God can do with ... the man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him." I think we know what God can do with such a person; we see it in the life of John Calvin. What can God do with you and me? Not much until – by his grace – we offer our hearts to him. And when we do that anything is possible. Amen.

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*Jeff Gibelius, Pastor*

***Second Presbyterian Church***

*528 Garland Dr.*

*Carlisle, PA 17013*

*[www.GrowWithSecond.org](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org)*

*717-243-4571*

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