

## **What Is the Significance of Calvin's Legacy for Christians Today?**

*A Background Paper for the Calvin Jubilee 2009*

*In two years time, John Calvin's birth in 1509 will be commemorated. In Geneva and all over the world the celebration of this anniversary will provide an opportunity to reflect on his legacy and to discover his relevance for the pressing issues of today. To start this process of reflection, fifty theologians from different continents and countries met from April 15 to 19, 2007, in Geneva, at the invitation of the John Knox International Reformed Centre, the Swiss Protestant Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Theological Faculty of Geneva. The following statement is a summary of their findings.*

Who was Calvin and what is the significance of his legacy for today? These perennial questions arise with special urgency as the anniversary of Calvin's birth in 2009 approaches. For the Reformed churches Calvin is a continuing source of inspiration and they are therefore looking forward to the celebration with a sense of deep gratitude and as an opportunity of their own commitment and renewal. They would like to share the true legacy of Calvin with Christians of other traditions and with society. At the same time they are aware that the image of Calvin is contradictory and today often presented in a negative perspective. Like no other Reformer of the 16th century he has become the victim of clichés. Four stereotypes invariably return when his name is referred to in public

- his grim concept of double predestination: God elects some for salvation and destines others to damnation;
- the moral austerity which he imposed on the people of Geneva;
- his participation in the execution of Michael Servetus;
- his role in the historical development of modernity, in particular modern capitalism. For some he is one of the fathers of modernity, for others he laid the ground for a prosperity-oriented spirituality.

Though these perceptions of Calvin are widely accepted and taken for granted by many, they represent a reduction and, in fact, a distortion of the historical reality. More, they lead to an attitude of prejudice which obstructs access to the true significance of the Reformer. The consultation came to the conclusion that a fresh effort of interpretation should be undertaken. We call therefore on theologians and intellectuals of other academic disciplines, as well as the whole people of God, to re-visit the heritage of the great Reformer. We are convinced that it contains insights and perspectives which remain relevant for today. A closer study of his writings, not only of the Institutes but also his shorter treatises, sermons and commentaries will reveal unexpected riches.

Calvin belongs to the second generation of the Reformation movement. Through his teaching and his life he has decisively contributed to the consolidation of the Reformation. The range and coherence of his thinking have made possible the building up of Reformed churches. At the Reformation jubilee in 2017 his name must therefore be recognized. Without Calvin the Reformation would have taken a different course.

The effort to go beyond the widespread stereotypes must, in our view, be guided by the following three principles:

1. Point of departure of any valid interpretation must be the fundamental impetus of Calvin's life. What was ultimately the driving force of his theology and life? Particular and problematic aspects of his teaching, like, for instance, his doctrine of predestination, must be seen and interpreted in the framework of his primary intentions in understanding God, creation, human salvation, and the fulfilment of all things.
2. Often, Calvin is held responsible—positively or negatively—for historical developments of later centuries. In the eyes of some he has opened the door to the modern world, in particular capitalism, in the eyes of others he bears the responsibility for the narrow biblicist moralism which characterizes certain Protestant churches. To get an authentic image of Calvin, it is necessary to be guided by his own intentions and utterances.
3. Calvin lived in a very particular situation—attacked by enemies and also contested in his own city of Geneva. He had to defend his perception of the Gospel in troubled times. Calvin was not simply a theological writer but was drawn—against his personal inclination and will—into the struggles of his time. It is essential to interpret Calvin in the context of his time. Much new research has been done in recent times on particular aspects of his life. A more serene understanding has been made possible.

Calvin was no saint; and any attempt to draw an idealized picture of him is bound to fail. We recognize that his response to conflicts in Geneva could be harsh, and that his role in the execution of Servetus was, indeed, more than dubious. Even against the yardstick of his own convictions he failed in decisive moments. His use of language against theological adversaries renders the reading of certain of his writings difficult. As we reflect on the relevance of his heritage, we realize that certain aspects of his teaching are no longer pertinent and cannot be maintained. But, in our view, Calvin remains an outstanding witness of the Christian message and deserves to be carefully listened to today.

Here is a selection of eight areas which, in our view, are of particular interest today and may provide fresh access to Calvin's legacy:

1. *Calvin's Commitment to Proclaiming the Glory of God.* Calvin believes that God, the sovereign and gracious Creator of all, desires to be in intimate relationship with us human beings. This God seeks to delight us by accommodating to the conditions of our creaturely existence precisely in order to know and be known by us. In the crudeness of the manger, the starkness of the cross, and the limitations of the biblical words, God meets us and claims us through the power of the Holy Spirit. The glory of God, who chooses to manifest himself in this way, is reflected in the glory of human existence as we seek to enact the Gospel in all areas of life.

What then? Humans have become like vanity; they are reduced to nothing; they are nothing. Yet, how could they be nothing when God magnifies them? How can those be nothing on whom the heart of God is fixed? Let us take

courage. Although we are nothing in our own hearts, there is perhaps something latent about us in the heart. O Father of mercies, O Father of the miserable, how do you fix *your* heart on us! For your heart is where *your* treasure is (*Institutes* III.2.25).

2. *Calvin's determination to place Jesus Christ at the forefront of all our thinking and living.* In honouring the name of Christ who became flesh of our flesh, the glory and grace of God are attested in our midst. "If we separate ourselves even by one single inch from Christ, salvation fades... where Christ's name does not sound, everything becomes stale" (*Institutes* II.16.1). The Church depends entirely on the presence of the living Jesus Christ through the power of God's Spirit. Thus it becomes the communion of the "lovers of Christ" (*amateurs du Christ*, preface to Olivetan's Bible translation). It cannot rely on tradition or on the strength of existing structures. Calvin's critique of the Church of his times was based on this firm conviction.
3. *Calvin's emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in creation and salvation.* The action of God is universal and all-encompassing. For Calvin, it expresses the divine rule over all creatures, human and non-human. Nothing is beyond the wisdom and parental care of God. The Spirit is a life-giving force, sustaining all things in being. That same Holy Spirit unites us with Christ, inspiring us in our understanding of God's Word, illuminating and sanctifying us in faith, and gathering us into the communion of the church. Calvin always speaks about the church, with its ministry of word and sacrament as the community of believers within which faith is born, nourished and strengthened through the action of the Holy Spirit. As members of his body we live in hope for the renewal of our lives and of the whole world.
4. *Calvin's engagement with Scripture.* For Calvin, the Bible is at the heart of the church's life, ever to be read and studied by each one of God's people. It is to be taught within the Church, which he describes often as the mother and school of our faith. "Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives" (*Institutes*, IV.1.4). Calvin's careful attention to the content and unity of the Old and the New Testaments, the centrality of the Bible's witness to Jesus Christ, the need to wrestle over the meaning of the text with the help of the historical and scientific knowledge of his day, and the power of the Word of God to speak afresh to each generation remain exemplary. His exposition of Christian doctrine is never undertaken apart from his interpretation of Scripture, which in turn always takes place in the context of the daily work of preaching, pastoral care, and civic outreach.
5. *Calvin's determination that God's will be brought to bear on all areas of life.* Calvin's concern was that the glory of God be celebrated and witnessed to at all levels of life, that all of creation sing God's praises in concrete and vibrant ways, that the beauty of God's will be manifest in our patterns of life both grand and small. Calvin holds that the moral law in Scripture both convicts us of our sin against God's will and serves as a guide for glorifying God in every aspect of our daily lives. The Law, the form of God's purpose for the faithful, offers a space for human flourishing that is as welcoming and inclusive as it is binding and

formative. It gives boundaries and order to our creaturely existence so we might delight in the good gifts of God and respond with joyful gratitude.

6. *Calvin's insistence on God's gift of creation.* God's will for creation's flourishing is the constant measure of human society and humanity's engagement with the created world in all its mystery and depth. Central features of this vision are a fundamental affirmation of human equality and the celebration of difference between and among human persons. It includes an awareness of the profound inter-relatedness of all aspects of creation, the call for human beings to embody just relations, and an enduring commitment to the affirmation of human dignity. At the heart of this vision lies a compassionate commitment to love, justice, responsible care and hospitality towards "widows, orphans, and strangers": those who are defenceless, displaced, hungry, lonely, silenced, betrayed, powerless, sick, broken in body and spirit, and all those who suffer in our globalizing and polarizing world. "Where God is known, there also humanity is cared for (*in Ieremiam*, cap. 22,16)." Calvin claims that we see Christ in all persons and are uplifted and judged by his presence in them, ever proclaiming in our words and actions the integrity of creation as "the theatre of God's glory."
7. *Calvin's realization that the church is called to discern, in ongoing ways, its relation to the principalities and powers of the world.* In our present global context, this includes both various forms of state and nation and the ever-shifting reality of the global market. This includes the church's confession of its involvement in creation's brokenness and human suffering as well as its desire to prophetically preach and embody God's good will towards the world. Calvin acknowledges, as well, that God's glory can be proclaimed and embodied outside the church and that the Christian community is called to engage her global neighbours with both humility and bold vision. The church realizes that the form and content of this engagement will vary from place to place and time to time, in ways as manifold and rich as the faithful lived-realities of God's creation itself. Nevertheless, it cannot but obediently and gratefully respond to God's Word in the present, and as such, be a constructive witness to Christ.
8. *Calvin's commitment to the unity of the church.* Calvin's passionate and consistent commitment to the unity of the body of Christ was lived out within the reality of an already fragmented church. In the midst of division, he acknowledged the one Lord of the one Church, stressing repeatedly that Christ's body is one, that there is no justification for a divided church, and that schisms within churches are a scandal. Our current situation is also one of separated churches and threatened splits within churches. In particular, Reformed churches continue to be characterized by internal division as well as by ecumenical commitment. Calvin's thinking about the nature of Christian community, his willingness to mediate controversial matters such as the Lord's Supper, and his tireless efforts to build bridges at every level of church life, stand as a contemporary challenge. Calvin challenges churches to understand the causes of continuing separation and, in accordance with Scripture, to strive toward visible unity by engaging in concrete ecumenical efforts—all for the sake of the gospel's credibility in the world, and the fidelity of the church's life and mission.