



REFORMED SPIRITUALITY AT THE MILLENNIUM

By Brad Kent

The Spirituality Supermarket

Every time I go to California I am aware that I have entered a supermarket of spiritualities. California is where America shops for spiritual experiences. There are more brands of spirituality on their shelves than there are brands of breakfast cereal at Safeway.

Down one aisle I find brands with which I am familiar. Hanging above them is a sign saying "Christian." The red, white and blue boxes are labeled Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian. These are the oatmeal, the Raisin Bran, the Shredded Wheat of spirituality. But as I go down the next aisle I encounter brands I've never tried. The sign above them reads "New Age." The boxes are rainbow colored and their labels read The Gaia Hypothesis, Neopaganism, and "Seven Steps to Anything and Everything." These are the granola, the muesli, the Fruit Loops of spirituality.

A Third Great Awakening?

What is characteristic of California is becoming more common in other places. The spirituality supermarket has branches in every state, and business is booming. The intense interest and involvement in various types of spirituality suggests that as we enter the next millennium we may be crossing the threshold into a third Great Awakening. If this is so, this Awakening, while similar in its intensity, may be different in its result. The first two Awakenings brought new people into the church, but today many awakened souls are leaving the church, having not found there the spirituality

The hand holding the burning heart comes from John Calvin's personal seal. The accompanying motto was

Cor meum Tibi offero Domine
Popte et sincere.

"Unto you, Lord, I offer my heart
Poptly and sincerely".



continued on page 3

Editor's Reflections

by Kris Haig

When I began my ministry in spiritual formation here at the General Assembly, I sometimes (informally) described my work as "remedial education for Presbyterians."

This remedial education has three components. First, we need learn an effective and shared vocabulary with which to speak of the spiritual life. The language of the sixteenth century, or even the nineteenth century, isn't always adequate for the church in the late twentieth century.

Second, we need to learn a repertoire of spiritual disciplines or practices that foster spiritual formation. How can we pray? How can we cultivate a greater awareness of the activity of God in the world? How can we live in community?

And third, we need to engage in theological reflection on the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity.

In our lead article, my colleague Brad Kent engages us in theological reflection by sharing some thoughts about spirituality in the coming millennium. He invites us to reconnect with the spirituality of John Calvin, who, more than any other person,

shaped the practice of the Christian faith for Presbyterians and others who trace their religious heritage to the Protestant Reformation as it was expressed in Geneva in the 16th century.

Brad has many credentials in theology and spirituality. In addition to the Master of Divinity degree and many years experience in pastoral ministry, he holds a Ph.D. from Edinburgh University, and also has completed the Certificate in the Art of Spiritual Direction from San Francisco Theological Seminary.

But perhaps Brad's most unique and captivating qualification is his newfound ability to make John Calvin come alive in an uncanny way. Brad bears an amazing physical resemblance to a young John Calvin – a feature he has enhanced by growing his beard for the past year and a half so that it more nearly matches Calvin's scraggly beard. (It is interesting to note that Calvin grew his beard long as an act of protest while he was a university student, in defiance of university rules limiting the length of student beards).



John Calvin
16th century Reformer



Brad Kent
Associate for Spiritual Formation

Reformed Spirituality

continued from page 1

Fortunately, the Presbyterian church has not been caught napping during this Awakening. Responding to grassroots interest, our General Assembly in 1991 adopted a new emphasis on spiritual formation and in 1993 named it a priority for our denomination.

What Is Spiritual Formation?

After reviewing the legions of spiritualities old and new parading past him, Andrew Canale generalized that what is meant by "spirituality" is the search for connection with one's "true self" and with a "core reality" that gives value and meaning to life.¹ Spiritual formation refers to those rites and rituals, those practices and disciplines, that one goes through in order to achieve this connectedness.

For Christians, this "core reality" is our triune God, and our "true self" is what Eugene Peterson calls our "Child-of-God Self."² Our spiritual formation takes place through a wide variety of disciplines or practices that enable the Holy Spirit to shape us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ, the one perfect Child-of-God Self.

Many people agree with T. Hartley Hall, past president of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, who contends that "Reformed spirituality" is a something of an oxymoron. Hall feels this way because the word "spirituality" is notably absent from the vocabulary of classical Reformed writers – their word was "piety." Although John Calvin included personal prayer and the devotional reading of scripture as part of piety, later Calvinists came to limit it to a "person's behavior as regards the duties and obligations inherent in living the Christian life."³

Piety as Obedience

As time went on, piety became equated with obedience to God's will. Whether liberal or conservative, evangelical or social activist, Presbyterians have regarded the Christian life as doing what God required. Obedience was seen as our primary connection with God, the channel through which the Holy Spirit came into our lives. A survey of Presbyterians 25 years ago asked the question, "What is the most important aspect of your faith?" The most frequent answer was not "Knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." That was second. The most frequent answer by far was "Obeying the Ten Commandments."

Piety became a way of seeking God's *will*, rather than seeking *God*. The result of this was *faithfulness*, but not necessarily *faith*. It is small wonder that there is what Howard Rice describes as "a deeply embedded resistance to spirituality among those churches within the denominational tradition called Reformed."⁴

That resistance is waning. Presbyterians are thirsting and hungering for genuine experiences of God. We want something that can be felt in the heart as well as known with the mind. We want a spirituality that is a rich mix of thinking and feeling, of doing and being. Books like Howard Rice's *Reformed Spirituality* and Marjorie Thompson's *Soul Feast*⁵ have shown us that we don't have to leave our tradition to find this.

Meeting Calvin Again

Reformed spirituality in the coming millennium will include several developments. First, to paraphrase the title of a religious best seller, we will be "meeting Calvin again for the first time" and, when we do, we will discover that there is a "softer side" of John. The side of Calvin we are most familiar with is the stern scholar who valued rationality above all else; the dogmatic intellectual who stood squarely in the tradition of medieval scholasticism; the rigid lawyer who lived a life of strict piety.

This was the Calvin I met in seminary and have known ever since. Frankly, he wasn't the sort of guy I ever wanted to spend much time with.

William Bouwma has helped me realize that this traditional view Calvin is only part of the picture.⁶ Reading Bouwma, I became aware that we have been seeing only Calvin's left-brained side. When we look at his right-brained side, we get a different profile. We see a softer side of John, a man who knew Christ in a deeply personal way, who said that the essence of the Christian faith is union with Christ, who asserted the primacy of religious experience over doctrine, a man whose motto was, "*My heart I offer you, God, freely and sincerely.*" A flaming heart held in an outstretched hand remains to this day the symbol of our Presbyterian progenitor.

To be sure, Calvin can take his place in the assembly of Enlightenment rationality. But he also was a mystic. He wrote that doctrine "is not a matter of talk but of life. It is not grasped by intellect alone, like other branches of learning. *It is received only when it fills the soul and finds a home in the inmost recesses of the heart.*"⁷ [emphasis added.]

Calvin believed that the goal of the Christian life was an ever deepening union with Christ. In commenting on Paul's image of the church as the Body of Christ, Calvin said that the joining of the head with the members of the body is a "mystical union."⁸ Writing on Baptism, Calvin said that one becomes ingrafted into Christ and thereby one with him. We are incorporated into him and he into us, Calvin insisted.⁹ When discussing the Eucharist, he said that by the power of the Spirit, one was seated at the heavenly banquet table feasting with the Christ. When asked to explain the presence of Christ in the sacrament, he said that "If anyone asks me about the process, I do not mind admitting that it is too high a mystery for my mind grasp or my words to express. I feel rather than understand it."¹⁰

Reclaiming a Broader Tradition

Reformed spirituality at the millennium will be meeting Calvin again, and coming to know his softer side. But not only will we be meeting Calvin again. We also will be meeting other spiritual giants - some perhaps for the first time. We will become friends with people like Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross. We will mine the riches of ancient, earthy Celtic Christianity and get to know Brigid, Guthbert, and Ninian. We will gaze on the icons of the Orthodox Church and find them windows to God.

This claiming of the broad Christian tradition as our own is the second aspect of Reformed spirituality at the millennium.

Approaches to Scripture

A third aspect of Reformed spirituality at the millennium is that it will involve more than one approach to scripture. Scripture has always held pride of place in

the Reformed tradition. The title "Reformed tradition" is shorthand for the fuller statement, "reformed by the Word of God."

I mentioned earlier our pietistic emphasis on doing God's will. If one was to do God's will, one had to know God's will. This became the basis for Bible study. We studied the scriptures to discover the do's and don't's of Christian living. As James Angell points out, serving God with one's mind - sometimes at the expense of serving God with one's heart and soul - became a hallmark of Presbyterianism.¹¹ We read the Bible for *information*, not *formation*. We sang "More about Jesus, would I know, more of his love to others show," but we rarely expected to know Jesus more personally ourselves - nor to experience his love more fully.

As the new millennium draws near, we are learning again how to read scripture in another way, a way that is

dramatically described in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision in which he was given a scroll with God's word on it and told to eat the scroll. The image here is of scripture becoming part of us. Through a process called *lectio divina* (divine reading) medieval monks were counseled to chew on the word, to ruminate over it, savoring its taste and textures, so it would nourish their souls.

It is interesting to note that while Calvin did insist that the study of scripture is "needed as guide and teacher for anyone who would come to God,"¹² he also approached the scriptures in a way that was very close to the method of *lectio divina*.

Varieties of Prayer

Not only will we read scripture in a new-old way, but we will pray differently. Calvin said that prayer is "the chief exercise of faith, by which we daily receive God's benefits."¹³ He also described prayer as "direct and pure contemplation of God,"¹⁴ and "none other than an expanding of our heart in the presence of God."¹⁵

When I was growing up I was taught that prayer was talking to God, and I'm sure I stretched God's infinite patience to the max by doing just that. As an adult, I was shocked to discover that prayer was also *listening* to God.

Prayer can be as simple as breathing,
as active as dancing,
as noisy as singing,
as quiet as sitting in silence,
as repetitious as reciting a verse
of scripture over and over,
or as creative as shaping
a lump of clay.

I have even gone beyond that. For me, prayer is, to use John Killinger's phrase, "the act of being with God."¹⁶

What I've also discovered is that I can be with God in many different ways. I don't have to come into God's presence with head bowed and hands folded. I now know that prayer can be as simple as breathing, as active as dancing, as noisy as singing, as quiet as sitting in silence, as repetitious as reciting a verse of scripture over and over, or as creative as shaping a lump of clay. Recognizing this has made it more nearly possible for me to follow Paul's mandate to "pray constantly."

Discovering New Disciplines

Reading scripture and praying are two spiritual practices explicitly commended by Calvin. As we enter the new millennium, our Reformed spirituality will include other disciplines - disciplines that have not been an active part of the Reformed tradition.

Calvin spoke out against many of the spiritual disciplines that were part of the medieval church. He saw, correctly, that they were being used to try to insure salvation, or at least to shorten one's tenure in purgatory. This, of course, ran counter to Calvin's understanding of justification by faith - that believers were totally dependent on God's grace and nothing else for salvation. No spiritual practice could gain a person one ounce of God's grace.

There was, however, an important place for certain spiritual practices because, even though they couldn't gain God's grace, they could make that grace more effective in the life of the believer. Unlike Luther, Calvin saw the Christian life as an ongoing process of regeneration and sanctification.¹⁷

We can think of spiritual disciplines as something like a golfer's hitting a bucket of balls on the driving range, or a pianist's playing a series of scales. Spiritual disciplines put us in a place where God can reach us more easily. Howard Rice says that spiritual disciplines are activities that make us more vulnerable to encounters with God.¹⁸

For example, although Calvin did not specifically

commend fasting, he did say that a simple life style was more conducive to knowing and serving God than a life of luxury - something we need to realize in this age of corporate greed and personal over-consumption.

Responsibility in the World

It would be a grave mistake to think that spiritual disciplines only benefit us personally. Our Reformed tradition would never permit this. To be exact, this is where our tradition makes its most characteristic contribution to spiritual formation. Our tradition will insist that we reassert our Christian responsibility toward the world.

Calvin insisted that if one's piety didn't produce works of love and justice - what he called "works of righteousness" - it wasn't true piety.

Another reason that Calvin was so opposed to the spiritual disciplines of the medieval church was that they were too inward, too individualist, too personalistic, lacking any clear social or ethical dimensions. Calvin was

opposed to monasticism primarily because of its withdrawal from the world and its assertion that the contemplative life was superior to a life of responsibility toward family and community. While human effort could not create the Kingdom of God, it could make human community more like God's Kingdom.

Reformed spirituality takes its distinctive stamp from the ethical and the social. It is never removed from the realities of the world. It is rightly skeptical of any spiritual experience that cannot be authenticated in community. While we may "come to the garden alone" to be with Jesus, we also expect to find him on crowded city streets. Calvin would counsel that the goal of any spiritual practice is not "self improvement" but the welfare of one's neighbor. Remember that one of Calvin's accomplishments in Geneva was to build the first public sewer system in a European city - a truly spiritual activity!

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Spirituality in Community

Another characteristic of our Reformed spirituality is a distrust of individualism. We can't be Christian alone. True spirituality is always formed in community. This means that as we enter the next millennium we will be discovering new dimensions to corporate spirituality.

This already is happening. Chuck Olsen at the Heartland Presbyterian Center has written and taught about a process for transforming church boards into communities of spiritual leaders, and his book of that name is now the Alban Institute's all-time best seller.¹⁹ With Danny Morris of The Upper Room he has published another book, *Discerning God's Will Together*,²⁰ which outlines how church governing bodies can make decisions through prayerful discernment rather than relying only on deliberation, discussion and debate.

Remembering the Sabbath

Finally, our Reformed spirituality will lead us to rediscover the importance of Sabbath keeping. Calvin was unequivocal about the importance of this. God insisted on a time for renewal, and the Sabbath was made for humankind's benefit. Only two things were appropriate for the Sabbath: worship - "resting in the Lord" - and just plain rest. In our over-worked, over-wrought world, we need to recapture the divine wisdom of Sabbath. Ironic as it sounds, perhaps no area of our spiritual life needs greater "work" than this.

Sabbath keeping will not, however, mean a return to the strict Sabbatarianism of our Puritan ancestors. We won't close Target on Sundays or move all NFL games to Monday night. We will, however, have to find a rhythm between being and doing, working and playing, taking time for ourselves and giving time to others - a rhythm that will contribute to our psychological, physical, and social (as well as spiritual) well being. Opportunities to "come away and rest awhile" are essential.

In Conclusion

This is what I think Reformed spirituality will look like in the next millennium: We'll be seeing a side of Calvin we haven't seen before. We'll be reading scripture not only for information but for formation. Our prayer will manifest a variety of ways of being with God. We will be using the spiritual disciplines to make us more vulnerable to God. We will be re-engaging ourselves in service to the world. We will be finding rest and renewal through Sabbath keeping. We will do these not only individually but corporately.

Recall again that the symbol we associate with John Calvin is a flaming heart held in an outstretched hand and his motto, "My heart, I offer to you, my God." Perhaps the hope that Calvin would have for all of us who stand in the tradition he established would be for our hearts to be on fire, held in outstretched hands and offered to God. This is my vision for Reformed spirituality in the next millennium.

Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.

Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

NOTES

- 1 Andrew Canale, "The Cry of the Desperate." In *New Age Spirituality*, ed. Duncan Ferguson. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 1993.
- 2 Eugene Peterson, *The Message*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing; 1993.
- 3 T. Hartley Hall, "The Shape of Reformed Piety." In *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, eds. Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press; 1990.
- 4 Howard Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 1991.
- 5 Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Life*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 1995.
- 6 William Bouwma, "The Spirituality of John Calvin." In *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Faitt. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Co.; 1987.
- 7 John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, III. vi. 4. Ed. Tony Lane & Hilary Osborne. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Bookhouse; 1987.
- 8 John Calvin, *Commentary on I Corinthians*.
- 9 John Calvin, *Commentary on John*.
- 10 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xvii. 32.
- 11 Bouwma, "The Spirituality of John Calvin."
- 12 James W. Angell, *How To Spell Presbyterian*. Philadelphia, PA: Geneva Press; 1977.
- 13 Calvin, *Institutes*, I. vi. .
- 14 Calvin, *Institutes*, III. xx. 4
- 15 John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum* 37, 402.
- 16 John Killinger, *Prayer: The Act of Being with God*. Waco, TX: Word Books; 1981.
- 17 Calvin, *Institutes*, III. iii. 9
- 18 Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*.
- 19 Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Publications; 1995.
- 20 Danny E. Morris & Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Publications; 1997.



Hungryhearts

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Here & There

You can't get there from here.
Only if you stay
with each here and discover a way
to embrace its fear
can you listen for
the seed of hope within the terror.

You can't get here from there.
By fantasizing
of future place or year
you will fail to be present
in this now right here,
and you will miss
the seed of joy within the anger.

You will find that living
into the present -
the question this day,
the struggle this moment,
you will live your way
along into an amazing answer
and serendipitously,
miraculously,
you will discover you are there.

But you will not see
it along the way,
and even
when you arrive at your destiny
you will not find yourself saying,
"Now I am there,"
but only
what you have practiced each day:
"It is good to be here."

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That Wide Risky Reaching

in that wide risky reaching
we sometimes lose our footing
and find ourselves ingrateless and despondent
off fear and doubt

yet discover there is a dare
that is true to the music
that calls us still
than a more certain stance

*by Lynn Park
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