

John Calvin – preacher, thinker and theologian. A model for theological education today?

2009 was the 500th anniversary of the birth of the better known, and perhaps most misunderstood, voice of the Continental Reformation: John Calvin. 2009 has almost come and gone. There have been many celebrations in Geneva and around the world to mark the birth of John Calvin. *The Guardian online* (yes!) ran a series of 8 very instructive articles written by the philosopher Paul Helm which engendered a lot of comment. There have been numerous new biographies on John Calvin and the helpful new book *Engaging with Calvin* emerging from the Moore College faculty

Reflecting upon this considerable focus on John Calvin let me offer three suggestions about what we might learn from his life and legacy:-

Calvin – a lifelong preacher

Mark Dever is recorded as saying: “If you are going to be a preacher read Calvin”, and modern preachers would do well to heed his advice.

Over a twenty-five year period of ministry in Geneva Calvin would preach twice per Sunday and lecture a minimum of three times a week.

He believed that preaching was essential, because God’s presence is not mediated through a priestly office, but rather, through the faithful proclamation of the promises of God in his word. His appeal to the literal meaning of the text and the communication of God’s truth in plain language was grounded in his conviction that God addresses the soul through the word which is heard and heeded. But in order for this message to penetrate the fallen human mind, alongside the preacher’s efforts to be clear, the Holy Spirit’s illuminating role is essential.

Along with Calvin we too should have the theme of grace and faith central to our preaching. Grace is the invitation and saving work of God. Faith is that which the sinner exercises in grasping God’s offer of life.

Wycliffe shares this wholehearted view of the transforming power of godly preaching – and not least when a minister of the Gospel stays in one location to take time to preach the whole counsel of God. We too believe that the faithful exposition of God’s word produces lasting fruit in the believer’s soul and in the transformed society around.

Calvin - an integrated thinker

Following in the line of Melancthon and others, Calvin recognised the comprehensive nature of Paul’s epistle to the Romans in its treatment of the doctrine of God, human

sinfulness and the redeeming work of Christ on the cross, and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit resulting in the transformation of life.

It is surely no coincidence that in the same year Calvin published his first full edition of *The Institutes* he also published his Commentary *On the Epistle to the Romans* (1539) *The Institutes* were rigorously revised over the next 20 years with the final edition appearing in 1559.

In his introduction to Romans, Calvin argues *that when any one gains a knowledge of this epistles, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture... the whole epistle is so methodological, that even from its very beginning it is framed according to the rules of art.*

Just as in Romans, Calvin's *The Institutes* move from the knowledge of God the creator to the knowledge of God the redeemer, to the way of grace in Christ, to the means of grace. The framework with which Calvin wrote and thought is simple in its profundity. Knowledge of God (Creator and redeemer); knowledge of self (In his image; but fallen) is at the heart of Christian faith.

He read the pagans and philosophical thinkers of his day, but applied his careful textual work to a framework of thought which would, through several revisions, become *The Institutes of Religion*.

The Calvinist stereotype, typified in the mealy mouthed, humourless, life-denying caricature illustrated in the Grant Woods picture *American Gothic* is far from the picture of John Calvin. Actually it is very much to Calvin that we owe the idea that, though the whole created order is fallen, nevertheless we are to enjoy all that he has made and rejoice in his providence in every area. He had a generous view of the value of civic order, of the wisdom of some philosophers, of the goodness of work and advances in medicine, all of which should lead us to thank and glorify God,

Wycliffe Hall is very glad that its alumni include not just godly preachers, but Christian thinkers and apologists, ethicists, politicians, writers, musicians etc. This, it seems to me, is quite close to authentic Calvinism.

Calvin - a heart for theological education

One area of particular interest for Wycliffe students and alumni was Calvin's abiding influence on in theological education and biblical scholarship. He arrived in Geneva in 1541, a small city at the crossroads between northern and southern Europe. Calvin was a frail and complicated man, also, of course a flawed man. His vision of a theodicy was never realised in Geneva. But his passion to see Geneva transformed by a faithful presentation of the word of God with a dependence that God would do his miraculous work in souls is surely a message for modern pastors and preachers.

The establishment of the Academy of Geneva in 1559 led to sending out godly preachers who had regularly heard Calvin preach and lecture. He inculcated a vision for Europe with many students being sent off to martyrdom in France.

The English puritan connection with Geneva in 16th century is significant. Many of the reformers went to Switzerland. At the height of Calvin's influence in Geneva Cranmer's critical work on the Prayer book was ongoing. Subsequent generations of English preachers would be proud to look to Calvin as a key influence on their ministry: George Whitefield, John Newton and hymn writer Augustus Toplady all Anglicans who thought of themselves as Calvinists.

Whilst Geneva in the 16th Century and Oxford in the 21st Century are notably different, Wycliffe Hall retains a vision to be both a part of the academy (of the University of Oxford) and a part of the Church. Our twin hope is summed up in our strap line: we hope that our students would love the Lord; treasure his Word; serve his people; and proclaim his Gospel. Calvin's legacy forces me to ask afresh: what could Wycliffe do for the kingdom's as we train and mentor, preachers, teachers and educators for the Church and the Academy?

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