

John Calvin and the Future of the Reformed Tradition

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Today let's shift the focus of our celebration of John Calvin's birth. Last night, under the expert direction of Prof. Mark Valeri, we considered some important aspects of Calvin's influence in the past. This morning I suggest we consider a question about the future. In this new century the social and cultural contexts in which we seek to live out our Christian faith are rapidly changing in profound ways we can scarcely discern or chart. So the broad question is: What resources does Calvin's heritage provide to help shape fresh ways in which to live our faith in those new contexts and to shape the ways in which we engage our changing culture?

Now that question is too broad to be manageable. We celebrate John Calvin's birth back in 1509 because his life and thought have shaped, for better and for worse, the world we inherited a half a millennium later. Of course he does not do that directly. After all there are not that many people who have repeatedly read, marked and inwardly digested Calvin's commentaries, sermons, lectures and letters, not to mention his Institutes of the Christian Religion, as though they were devotional literature that could shape our deepest attitudes, beliefs and passions. Rather, for the past five hundred years Calvin's influence has been filtered through something we call the Reformed Tradition of Christian belief and practice. It's the future of that filter that I'd like to think about today. Not the historian's question, "What did Calvin think in his day?" nor the historical question about how the Reformed Tradition shaped the "modern" culture we inherited, but a question about the future: What resources can the Reformed Tradition draw from Calvin to help us address the challenges of our changing society and can help us shape new ways of practicing Christian faith in the midst of those cultural changes?

There are quite a few. I want to focus on just three features of Calvin's work that have been central to the Reformed Tradition and have special relevance for the ongoing trajectory of some cultural changes we see going on around us now. However, in order to keep clear what the limits are of this discussion, I want first to clarify what I mean by the "Reformed Tradition."

About "Reformed Tradition"

"Tradition" is a verb before it's a noun. As a verb, "to tradition" is to hand on something on that has been handed to you. For example, in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it . . ." (11:23-24a). That's tradition as a verb. As a noun, what is handed on is not just a set of ideas. It is also a set of practices. They are not limited to churchly practices such as the celebration of communion. They are a whole way of living our lives which just is the way in which we go about "tradition" as a verb, the way we go about handing on something handed to us that we call the Gospel. We can think of the Reformed Tradition as one distinctive pattern or style of practicing handing on of the Gospel.

Another thing: The Reformed Tradition is a lot bigger than John Calvin, not to mention the Presbyterian Church. It is the branch of the reformation of the 16th century that began in various cities in Switzerland and then spread to various European countries. Calvin was the leader of reform in Geneva, but other Swiss cities had their own distinguished leaders. These people were in frequent contact with one another. They had important disagreements about how best to tradition the Gospel. Cultural anthropologists say that cultures are ongoing arguments, and cultural traditions are inherently contentious and conflictual. That is certainly true of the Reformed Tradition. Disagreement is not a corruption of the tradition; it is essential to it as a form of self-examination, self-criticism and self-reform. So one of the types of practice central to the Reformed Tradition has had to be practices of earnest and vigorous disagreement with one another about how best to live and speak the Gospel, while acknowledging at the same time that the other person is just as much a redeemed sinner and just as truly a member of the Body of Christ as I am. The unity of the Reformed tradition lies in God's grace, not in the uniformity of our acts of handing on the Gospel.

Third, the act of traditioning is inherently ambiguous. I can still remember the jolt I felt when my seminary New Testament professor pointed out that the stem of the Greek word Paul uses in 1st Corinthians that we translate “hand on” is also the stem of the Greek word we translate “betray” in the Gospel account of Judas handing Jesus over to the authorities in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our acts of traditioning the Gospel often, however unintentionally, traduce it. They themselves always stand in need of being reformed. Hence the Latin slogan Presbyterians love to quote when it suits our purposes to sound learned, especially in Presbytery meetings: ours is ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda. Ours is church “reformed and always reforming.” Among the practices handed on in the Reformed Tradition are practices of continual self-criticism and self-reformation. For that reason our church has adopted as its theological standard, not some one creedal formulation, but a whole book of them ranging from the 4th cen. Nicene Creed to the 1983 Brief Statement of Faith. Each is a product of its time, each formulated with an eye to challenges that the church faced at that time, and each perhaps not entirely adequate in some later cultural situation as a formulation of what we seek to hand on, and so each has been in need of later re-formation. But taken all together they chart a course, they line out a trajectory that we seek to follow in our own time in our own way.

As it has moved along that trajectory for five hundred years the Reformed Tradition has held on to some themes in Calvin’s work because they repeatedly showed how to reformulate the ways we say the Gospel and how to reform the ways we practice the Gospel in new historical situations. I want to suggest three themes in Calvin’s theology that are key to keeping the Reformed Tradition vitally engaged with aspects of the new cultural contexts in which we shall find ourselves living.

Three Resources from Calvin for a Future for the Reformed Tradition

My favorite Calvin birthday story so far was reported in the Christian Century:

“[A] Swiss chocolate maker has created a special chocolate paroline for the occasion [of Calvin’s birthday], one he thinks captures the essence of the Protestant reformer. ‘It’s not easy to represent theological ideas by using taste buds,’ acknowledged the master chocolatier. ‘But the key thing for Calvin is the glory of God, his excellence, his perfection. So we chose a chocolate that we chocolatiers find exceptional, rare and flawless.’” The Century titled this squib, “Total Depravity.”

For a passionate lover of dark chocolate it is an irresistible analogy for the central place that the glory of God has in Calvin’s theology. God’s sheer reality is the ultimate good, and it is overwhelmingly attractive. There is a strong aesthetic strand in Calvin’s discussion of God as creator in Book I of the Institutes. It tempts me to say – if it wouldn’t trivialize Calvin’s point – that for Calvin it is the awesome gorgeousness of God’s simple “thereness,” God’s concrete actuality, that is the glory of God, that which is ultimately worthy of being valued above anything else.

Calvin is more specific about what God’s glory is like. It has a recognizable profile. For Calvin, the trustworthy clue to the nature of the glory of God is provided by the entire story of Jesus of Nazareth’s life, ministry, betrayal, trial, crucifixion and resurrection as told by scriptural witness. The movement of that story outlines the distinctive profile of a freely self-giving love that overcomes all resistance in order to create community. The glory of God is not the shock and awe of unlimited power. That would only elicit from us fear and loathing. Rather, it is that love that just is the glory of God because it is God’s own life, who God is.

One reason this theme is important for Christian faith and practice in the present cultural situation is that it has implications that are culturally counter-intuitive. A major challenge that our culture presents is not its denial of religion and God. This culture is saturated with “spirituality” and God-talk. The challenge is that this culture relentlessly trivializes God. For example: It is often remarked that every aspect of our culture is increasingly consumerist and commodified. Part of what that means is that our culture relentlessly urges us to assume that something is valuable only if it is useful to us, and that it is useful to us only if consuming it will help us deal with one of our problems. So we are urged to think of what is valuable to us as commodities, packets of goods we can consume so they’ll be useful: everything from choices of foods and medicine to choices of entertainments, life style and jobs, and, most chilling, our relationships. We are urged to think of God in the

same way. Sometimes blatantly, very often quite subtly we are urged to turn to God in trust and love because God can be useful to us in coping with our problems. Our culture forms us, molds us into a posture, a way of orienting ourselves towards God according to which what makes God worthy of trust and love, what makes God God, is that God is useful to us in dealing with our problems. Calvin's point about God being glorious in and of Godself, quite aside from anything God does for us, is that the culture's way of thinking about God just trivializes God.

This is a delicate point and I want to make it with some care. We all want God to be useful to us. We all want God's justice and peace to be established on this earth. We all want God to mend our broken relationships, want God to end suffering and to give it meaning while it lasts, want the peace and joy of God in our hearts, want our loved ones to be safe and to flourish, want to be set free from the evil distortions that bind our lives in knots. We turn to God to have our lives turned around. That is right and good.

But Calvin's point about the glory of God is this: Paradoxically, only the God who is not necessarily "useful" to us can be genuinely "useful" to us. If the glory of God, if what makes God ultimately good are the ways in which God is "useful" to us, whether to create us or to reconcile us or to liberate a world in bondage to oppression, then God just has to be useful in order to be God. But in that case, God's being "useful" to us is not really free loving. It's more like a necessary or compulsive power flow that is good-for-us, that is "useful" toward coping with our problems, a sort of cosmic utility. And our response is to develop the techniques by which we can tap into that energy, manage it, package it, consume it. That is a natural thought in a basically consumerist culture that defines "value" and "good" in terms of the usefulness of commodities. It is also the ultimate trivialization of God. Calvin's counter-point is that what makes God God, worthy of trust and love above all other loves, is that God is overwhelmingly attractive, good in and of God's self, quite apart from God's relating "usefully" to needy creatures, and that that good is a freely self-giving love that creates community. Such a God is capable of loving needy creatures in ways that are genuinely "useful" to them in their deepest needs, but given God's freedom that love cannot be manipulated or turned into a consumable commodity. That is the glory of God.

Christians in the Reformed Tradition have historically understood God's mission in Jesus Christ as aimed at transforming their cultural contexts, in our case a consumerist culture. Our response to God in trust and love must be a posture toward the culture that is genuinely engaged in the culture (or else we aren't going to make any difference in it) but is not shaped by the trivializing cultural assumption that what makes something valuable and good is its usefulness. In emerging cultural contexts our Reformed Tradition says we need to be oriented toward our cultural context in ways that are shaped instead by the overwhelmingly attractive goodness of God in and of Godself, quite apart from the ways God is "useful" for us. Our orientation to the world, our posture in our culture, needs to be anchored outside the value structure of that culture in the love that is the glory of God. Only such a God can be genuinely "useful" in our deepest needs.

This need points to an important challenge to the Reformed Tradition. Our ways of being oriented to their world can be shaped by the ways in which we practice the Christian faith. Calvin argued that the ways we practice the Christian faith fall into two groups defined by the double love commandment: practices of love to God and practices of love to neighbor. I'll come back to love to neighbor in a moment. For Calvin practices of love to God were various ways of adoring the glory of God. They are our response to the overwhelming attractiveness of God's love for its own sake and not because of what it can do for us. These practices were part of everyday life and not limited to congregational worship. Nowadays we would call them "spiritual disciplines." In my grandparents day they were called "piety." I think it's fair to say that by the mid-20th century they had pretty much evaporated from most Reformed Christians' daily lives, except for traces when people remembered to give thanks for a meal. Earlier patterns of piety were suited to an earlier culture and no longer felt appropriate. If the Reformed Tradition is going to shape our deepest ways of being oriented to our culture, at once to help transform it and to resist it, I suggest it will have to be creative in developing its own new ecclesial culture, even a physical culture, of practices of the adoration of God. It will need to develop its own spiritual disciplines. In this regard it has much to learn from its Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican brothers and sisters.

Now to a second resource in Calvin's theology for the Reformed Tradition's engagement with its newly emerging cultural contexts. This it has to do with the second side of our response to the attractive love of God:

practices of love for our neighbors as for ourselves. It is important because it cuts against another aspect of our cultural context.

Writers on newspaper “op ed” pages often point out that American culture, especially in its political rhetoric and mass entertainment, increasingly shows strong Manichean themes. Manicheanism is a religious worldview that was very influential in the Greco-Roman culture of the early days of the church. At bottom it sees the world in a dualistic way. The world is a mix of good beings and evil beings. The good ones are unambiguously good all the way through, the evil ones unambiguously evil all the way through. The world is the arena of a conflict in which the good forces constantly resist the evil forces. Of course, in practice “our side” in any conflict is the side of good, so “they,” the other side must be evil through and through. Hence the goal of every conflict is for the forces of good to dominate, if not destroy, the forces of evil. This way of viewing the world has clear implications, I think, for everything from relating to difficult family members and neighbors to international relations.

Because the Manichean worldview was easily confused with what Christianity has to say about evil the church resisted it strongly. The implication of the Gospel is, yes, there are lots of evil forces at work. At the same time, they are the forces of God’s creatures, created good. Evil is parasitic on what God creates good. Evil is a dangerous parody, a twisting of what God created good. The distortedness of evil makes it dangerous. Evil is a twisting that goes so deep that creatures are finally incapable of un-distorting themselves. Redemption is precisely that: God’s act of doing what we cannot do, un-distort us and our lives. If there is no good creature “there,” evil would a parasite without a host. It would have nothing to distort. Moreover, redemption of creatures bound in evil’s distortions would be impossible. There would be no creature there to redeem. The Gospel implies that it is a terrible oversimplification of our world to view it as full of creatures -- those “others” who we see as our enemies – who are nothing but evil beings through and through, simply evil and nothing else.

One of the resources Calvin offers Christians in the Reformed Tradition to help us live in new cultural contexts in ways that work toward their transformation, without becoming “of” them, is his sharp eye for the endless number of ways in which the world, and our neighbors, and we ourselves are thoroughly ambiguous: all simultaneously creatures that are good, inherently valuable ends in themselves, whose value must be honored in the way we act and interact, and distorted versions of themselves that are dangerous to each other and in need of being un-distorted in ways we cannot bring about. It seems to me Calvin’s sharp eye for ambiguity gives him an ingrained skepticism about human inter-actions that would have made him a first rate investigative reporter for a major newspaper. His is not a cynical mindset that assumes that creatures are simply evil underneath more or less clever disguises. It is a realistic mindset that registers the endless complexity of the ambiguity of creaturely interactions and refuses to simplify it into an edifying drama of good guys versus bad guys.

Calvin expresses his insight into our ambiguities in several ways. He is often pilloried for characterizing our distorted condition as “total depravity,” as though Calvin thought that beneath a socialized veneer of civility what we really are is incorrigible sociopaths. That is to forget that for Calvin it is God’s good creatures who are “totally depraved” without – and here’s where the ambiguity lies – ceasing to be good creatures. That’s not a self-contradiction for Calvin. “Depraved” is no longer a helpful term. It’s Latin root simply means “bent” or “twisted.” Calvin’s point is that in sin good creatures are thoroughly distorted in every aspect of their lives. There’s no niche of undistorted creatureliness, no “pure” creaturely capacity or power, no inner pure spiritual flame left untouched and untwisted in sin. If there were, perhaps we could develop techniques by which to nurture those undistorted powers, ways to fan that inner spiritual flame into vigorous spiritual fire, and save ourselves. But we can’t. Calvin’s point is that the ambiguity goes all the way down.

He expresses his insight into our ambiguity another way, this time from the side of redemption rather than creation. We whose sin estranges us from God have been reconciled to God, we are “justified;” but we nonetheless remain sinners. Neither description alone, neither “justified” nor “sinner,” captures the full complexity of our situation before God. We are too ambiguous for such a description to be adequate.

Calvin expresses this ambiguity in yet another way. The good news of the Gospel is that in the midst of our estrangement from God and the way it twists our lives into knots, and before we could do anything to overcome the estrangement, God has come among us in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to God and liberate us from our self-distortions. Before God you are justified by grace through faith. Martin Luther had focused afresh on that news in powerful and liberating ways, and Calvin followed suit. You are all already actually right with God, he said,

but at the same time he was careful to insist that it is also true that we are not all right. We need to have our lives re-formed by God, disciplined by the Holy Spirit in a process of being made holy, a process of sanctification that is costly and painful. Reconciling grace is utterly unconditional, but, given our ambiguous condition, it can't be cheap.

This brings us back to the second side of our response to the attractive love of God: practices of love for our neighbors as for ourselves. Learning how to go about loving our neighbors is what the process of "sanctification," being formed as a more holy person, is all about. Calvin didn't just express an insight into our ambiguities; he also insisted that people of faith must devise concrete, everyday practices of love for neighbor that put the Sermon on the Mount into effect. On one side, they are practices that sharpen our own capacities to discern the complex ambiguities of our relationships, especially when there is conflict. That requires learning how to get over ourselves, how to put ourselves aside in order to hear and see others for their own sakes, and not for how they can advance our projects. Calvin called these practices of "self-denial." Love for neighbor also requires practices that make for what the Sermon on the Mount identifies as the neighbors' wellbeing. The test case here of loving in ways that acknowledge ambiguity surely is the call to practice love for our enemies who have done, or may do, us evil. At the same time, like us, though sinful, they are also God's good creatures and, though sinners, justified by God's grace.

Christians in the Reformed Tradition require an anchor that will help keep them from being dragged into the Manichean undertow of contemporary American culture. Calvin's sharp eye for the moral ambiguities of ourselves and fellow creatures, and the practices he commends as ways to shape our own ways of responding in love to fellow creatures, have large implications for a broad range of relations from the inter-personal to the international. I do not see that his insight implies any one Christian ethical theory relevant to moral issues in personal or international relations. But I do suggest that if people in the Reformed Tradition appropriated this resource from Calvin in public discussion of such moral issues and insisted on showing how these ambiguities undercut simplistic Manichean descriptions of conflicts, it could reframe the way the moral issues are formulated in the first place and thus help re-form the debates.

Consider finally a third resource in Calvin's theology for the Reformed Tradition's engagement with a newly emerging cultural context. The pioneer sociologist of religion Max Weber credited Calvin and the Reformed Tradition with inventing the "work ethic." That was important because modern capitalism could not have arisen without a population of people whose religious life had formed them through the work ethic. However, in the three hundred years between Calvin's pre-modern day in, say, 1550 and the "work ethic's" modern version in, say, 1850 the ethic changed profoundly. Modernity's work ethic formed a very different kind of person than Calvin's work ethic formed. It may be that in our day the modern work ethic is in its turn giving way to a fundamentally different kind of ethic, one we might call a "consumerist ethic." If it is, it will shape yet another kind person altogether.

The differences are these. Calvin saw our work as one major way in which we go about loving our neighbors. Our work is a calling, a vocation through which we obey God's command to love our neighbors, including not only neighbors we don't know but also neighbors who are our enemies. That means a work ethic with three important strands: First, because our work is a vocation we undertake in obedience to God's command to love our neighbor as ourselves, we work hard at it, giving it the best of our time as unto God. Second, our work is not just a way we serve our neighbors one by one; it serves our neighbors collectively as a society. Hence work is a vocation to serve the common well-being, the health of the social order. Because our work is not a vocation to enhance first of all our personal prosperity, but is rather a communal practice aimed at enhancing the common well-being, individual affluence is not a natural right and individual prosperity cannot be credited to one's own individual unassisted hard work aimed as increasing one's own wealth. If it comes, prosperity is a gift from God, a gift that comes through others' work as well as being a result of your own work. Therefore ostentatious use of one's wealth is entirely inappropriate. One alternative was to save it. So thrift became an important feature of this Calvin-based work ethic.

Living before the Enlightenment Calvin was a "pre-modern" man who shared many medieval assumptions about social structure that we moderns, heirs of the Enlightenment, let go long ago. For example, he assumed the validity of a fairly rigid hierarchical structure of social status. For him the vocation to which you were called was basically tied to your gender and the type of work your family had traditionally done as peasants, or

shopkeepers or craftspeople, attorneys or aristocrats. The social mobility we take for granted was unthinkable to him, except perhaps as a recipe for social chaos. The Enlightenment introduced major changes in Calvin's work ethic in part by divorcing it from his view of a static social order, thereby making increased social mobility possible. More importantly, it changed Calvin's work ethic by divorcing it from the idea of a calling from God that is undertaken above all as an act of obedience to God. Nowadays work is something you do for yourself because in it you fulfill yourself, and only you can do that. The success of your work is viewed as the result of your individual effort. If it brings prosperity you are exclusively entitled to it. Wealth is the major goal in life.

This produces a subtly but importantly different work ethic. You work hard because you find self-fulfillment in it. It is what makes life meaningful. Wealth may be a sign of God's favor, but it is the consequence primarily of your individual personal effort. How you use your wealth is entirely at your discretion. Thrift will increase your wealth in the future; display will increase your social status now; if you choose, giving to the less fortunate out of your surplus is admirable. These are important features of the work ethic that is said to have made the industrial revolution and the rise of modern capitalism possible, both on the side of work force that industry needed and on the side of the entrepreneurs who funded and managed new industrial enterprises. It must be said that by the end of the 18th century the Reformed Tradition had largely bought into this version of the work ethic, especially in the United States.

Our current economic travails underscore some ways in which the industrial revolution's work ethic has itself changed. Calvin thought that charging interest for a loan was contrary to God's law revealed in the Old Testament. It is inherently usurious. Both our culture and the Reformed Tradition let that notion go long ago. However, increasingly in our culture money itself -- not persons -- does the work that produces wealth by being invested at the highest possible rate of interest. Increasingly it is knowledge manipulating information rather than physical labor manipulating raw materials that counts as "work." This view of work assumes above all that knowledgeable people manipulating relevant information will make objectively rational decisions about how to invest money so that it yields maximum return. The ethic still values hard work, where "hard" tends to mean very long hours sitting in front of computer screens. Wealth is still the major goal of life. Success is still viewed as largely the result of your individual skill as a rational decision-maker. If it brings prosperity you are exclusively entitled to it. However, work is not what makes life meaningful, and self-fulfillment is no longer found in hard work. One still has the discretion to save and invest even more, or to give to the less fortunate out of one's surplus. But in this work ethic self-fulfillment is found in the life-style that is made possible by the consumption of the commodities one can buy with the wealth produced by putting money to work. We can call this our emerging culture's "consumerist" work ethic.

Obviously what I have just sketched is a cartoon that cannot stand as serious social or economic history. However it does correctly highlight one major type of cultural change since Calvin. It is a change in assumptions about human nature. Modern culture's heritage in the Enlightenment and in the industrial revolution assumes a highly individualistic view of human beings as self-sufficient self-realizers through hard work. The Reformed Tradition largely bought into this view. An emerging culture assumes an equally individualistic but even more implausible view of human beings as rational decisions makers about both their investments and their consumption of commodities, and the view that self-realization comes through consumption.

Both of these views of what brings human fulfillment fundamentally contradict the implications of the good news of the Gospel. Calvin thought that believing in the God whose love is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth requires a social view of human beings as created by God for community with one another. He thought that human fulfillment lies in responding to God's love by a human love-to-God and a human love-to-neighbor that makes not only for the individual well-being of known, unknown and hostile neighbors alike, but also for the common well-being. His view of human nature, as reflected in his work ethic in contrast to its later variations, is a resource the Reformed Tradition desperately needs to recover as an anchor against the inertial drag of our cultural context's expertly merchandised assumptions about what the point of working is, about who we are accountable to in our work, and about where human self-realization truly lies.

These three themes, then, in Calvin's theology are resources on which the Reformed Tradition can draw in new cultural contexts that are now only emerging, but seem to have some assumptions that cut hard against the

implications of the Gospel we seek to tradition on our Reformed way. Calvin's stress on loving God in response to the overwhelming attractiveness of God's glory for its own sake, rather for what it can do for us, suggests the need for the Reformed Tradition to develop fresh spiritual disciplines that can help form persons in ways that orient them to God for God's own sake, rather than being formed by the culture's trivializing assumption that only a useful "God" is a valuable God. Second, Calvin's keen insight into the ambiguity of our contexts, good but fallen creatures, is, I suggest, a resource that people in the Reformed Tradition can draw on to resist their culture's Manichean assumptions about the relation between what is "good" and what is "evil" in the conflicts around them. And third, Calvin's view that human nature is inherently social, finding its fulfillment in responding to God's command to love God for God's own sake and to love neighbors, known, unknown and hostile, is a resource the Reformed Tradition needs to draw on to resist capitulation to modern and post-modern assumptions about human nature and self-fulfillment that simply contradict the implications of the Gospel we seek to tradition to our neighbors in the cultures we share, cultures in which we seek to live while struggling not to be formed or defined by them.

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