

“Happy Birthday, Dear John Calvin”

Psalm 100

I Corinthians 1:26-31

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Lake Forest, Illinois

On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth

There was no singing “Happy Birthday, dear John.” No party guests bringing gifts to the birthday boy. No cake with 500 candles. Instead, we sang “Holy Spirit, Visit Us!” and Psalm 8, “O Lord, how glorious is your name.” We brought offerings to God as the honoree. For refreshment, we shared the Lord’s Supper, bread and cup.

John Calvin would have loved it.

On Pentecost Sunday, an overflow crowd of around 1400 Reformed Christians representing 35 countries gathered from north and south and east and west at Saint-Pierre Cathedral in Geneva. I was there as a part of the educational “Calvin Jubilee Tour” sponsored by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The massive, festive Pentecost worship service was the first major celebration of the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth. A second international celebration was held in Geneva on July 10, the actual date of his birth. Today, I invite you to join the party.

In addition to worship (and touring the outstanding Reformation Museum), our primary purpose was to listen to the witness of other “offspring” of Calvin’s theology and piety. Notice, by the way, that “Reformed” is the name of Calvin’s line of the Christian family tree. Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, Congregational, and other denominations all consider ourselves part of the “Reformed” branch. It would be easier, I’m sure, if we churches that are children of Calvin called ourselves “Calvinian” as children of Martin Luther call themselves “Lutheran.” But the last thing Calvin wanted was focus on himself. It was the gospel he wanted to illuminate.

Why was I there? It's not that I'm a Calvin "junkie." Far from it. Nor was it an excuse to take a leisurely vacation in Geneva, Switzerland. Not in this economy, and not on a packed educational tour. No, I went because I wanted to find out what Calvin's DNA looks like as it adapted to different cultures and political climates. I wanted to see what is lasting and durable and important from Calvin – to help me understand *our* congregation in *this* culture and climate. We, after all, will be celebrating our own birthday soon – the 150th anniversary of our founding, starting with the charter ceremony next Friday at 3 p.m. at Triangle Park. Our founders brought the faith from their native Scotland ... the Scottish church in turn gained its faith from its founder, John Knox ... and John Knox studied directly under John Calvin in Geneva, seeking to replicate his church back in Scotland. Through our Scottish founders, we are indeed direct descendants of Calvin.

So ... how did we get to be who we are? What strands of Calvin's lineage are the strongest, the most durable, the most important to us, and perhaps, above all, the most useful to God? We discover a lot about ourselves when we see what's lasted in *other* places.

First there is the centrality of *Worship*. Calvin believed that our primary purpose in life is to come to know and love God. Every human being – not only the Christian – is endowed with a longing for God and the eyes to take in with awe God's hand in nature. Calvin said it this way: "Man was formed to be a spectator of the fabric of the world, and that he was endowed with eyes for the purpose of being led to God himself, the Author of the world, by contemplating so magnificent an image" (Comm. Romans 1:20, cited by Zachman p. 2). How many of us have found ourselves taking in some spectacular place in nature – the grandeur of the mountains ... the surging of the waves ... the endless sweep of the stars at night – and we can't help but feel close to the presence of God? This, Calvin said, is as God intended, that through the wonders of the universe we might comprehend God's own wisdom, mercy, and goodness.

But beholding God in nature isn't itself sufficient to lead us to the true knowledge of God. Human blindness, weakness and ingratitude keep us from truly seeing God manifested in the universe God made: "It is needful," Calvin said, "that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe." So God "added the light of his Word by which to become known." God gave us Scripture to help us discover God's presence and truth to guide our lives. For Calvin, Scripture is the primary authority that helps us know and love God.

I've known all that for a long time. But it was stunning to hear its power from Christians around the world. Rev. Kim Sam Hwan, the pastor of a 100,000 member church in South Korea – yes, 100,000 – had this to say: "Before a church community was even formed the Bible had been translated into the Korean vernacular. In Manchuria the Scottish missionary John Ross translated the Gospels with the help of four Koreans. ... When the first missionaries came to Korea they came with this Korean vernacular Bible in their hands." Some of those early missionaries included, by the way, a family that *our* congregation sent: Dr. and Mrs. Smith, medical missionaries who served there for forty years.

Having the Bible in the vernacular – and having worship be understandable – is key. In Calvin's day that meant changing worship from Latin to French in Geneva. In our day it may still mean changing worship to make God's word accessible and understandable. And sometimes those changes create tensions in a congregation. One of the funniest moments in our gathering in Geneva was when a representative from Indonesia, with humorous exasperation, reported that now their church has three different worship services to accommodate different generations' taste in music. I confess that I had no idea that "worship wars" had gone global. In truth, it's likely that that Calvin's emphasis on the vernacular lives on. Worship must be accessible to everyone, or the living Word is stripped of its power.

But worship is not sufficient to form a mature Christian. A second theme common to all of Calvin's offspring is the importance of *education*. Calvin's

favorite image of the church was “the School of Christ.” I was struck again in Geneva that Calvin gave lectures in the Auditorium right next to the St. Pierre Cathedral, where Calvin led worship. His Academy became the forerunner of the University of Geneva. Education in general and Bible study in particular were necessary for the full formation of a Christian life. This emphasis continues to express itself around the world. Rev. Kim said it this way: “The Bible study of the Korean Church was not merely ... for the sake of studying the text. The purpose of Bible Study within the Korean Church was in encountering God as He is revealed in the Bible. It was a time of encounter between the living Word of God and the living story of the people. The tradition of faith where the living God is encountered through Bible study and comes into our lives is the central element of Bible study in the Korean Church. Bible study is still actively and enthusiastically conducted within the Korean Church.” Education in general and the study of Scripture in particular are not merely cognitive exercises. Their higher purpose is to help us know God and to shape our lives.

And education is never just for “self” alone. A third strand of Calvin’s DNA showed up again and again in the theme of *mission to the poor and justice in the economy*. One especially stirring report came out of members of the Africa Inland Church in Sudan. As you know, the Muslim North has been at continual war with the Christian and tribal Sudanese to the South. It would be understandable if the Christians grew bitter, angry, and vengeful. Instead, the representatives from the Sudanese church told of their courageous outreach to the Muslim community in the North. After years of war, the Africa Inland Church’s outreach with medical aid and basic support is met with profound skepticism and distrust. Yet their steady message of God’s love is not daunted. Similarly, in the 1990s when North Korea suffered a traumatic famine, in spite of fifty years of estrangement the South Korean church reached out with solidarity to alleviate their hunger. In a staggering statistic, “when Korea faced their financial crisis of 1998 statistics showed that the income of the churches had dropped by 30% ... but the churches’ expenditure of financial resources in support of the socially weak, such as the homeless, had increased by 30%.” Calvin’s call for responsibility for the neighbor and

care for the lost led him to welcome French Hugenaut refugees in mass numbers to Geneva. The spirit of Calvin lives on in modern life.

Finally, Calvin's deep and lively knowledge of the *presence of God in the Holy Spirit* appeared again and again. It is, sadly, not something we associate with Calvin – we think of him as a dour old man, and we American Presbyterians have unfortunately earned our own title as “the frozen chosen.” But we children of Calvin are, at heart, a spirited tradition, as evidenced by the lively music and constant movement of our African and South American “cousins.” One of my favorite testimonies came from Edelberto Juan Valdes from Cuba: “We *are* a charismatic church,” he said. Not a “jumping church or a chattering church but one that nonetheless has gifts of the Spirit to share.” Calvin's trust in the Holy Spirit revives our souls today.

The point of the gathering was not to glorify John Calvin. Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, reminded us frequently that John Calvin “had no tolerance for placing a human being on a pedestal for reverence. A commemoration of the 500th anniversary of his birth done in a manner that simply glorifies one human being, John Calvin, would be against his principles, and if he were alive, he would be totally against it.” But he would, I think, be thrilled that the Spirit of God that transformed his life and changed our world is alive and well.

Salome Ntobea, a young woman from Ghana, reminded us that Calvin was only 27 years old when he wrote his seminal work, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. She, perhaps thirty herself, has enormous hope for the church through its young people. Though she put it more delicately than this, she assured us that the future of the church does not depend on hand-wringing old people. Calvin's Reformation lives on.

But in the midst of our intra-denominational skirmishes, it is helpful to remember how much we hold in common as Christians who share something of Calvin's DNA. The glory and kindness of God in creation. The gift of Scripture as God's Word in the world. Equipping the saints through

education, not as a nicety but as an essential element of upbuilding the body. Care for the poor and oppressed, and the stewardship of power for the common good. The power of the Holy Spirit to revive the world again and again and again.

I am so grateful I was able to celebrate Calvin's birthday with so many of our Reformed family of faith. In the end, I came away from our gathering neither wistful for the past, nor prideful about the present, nor confident about some grand Protestant future. Instead, I left humbled. It is, after all, not human will but the Sovereignty of God that is in charge of Christ's church. John Calvin, like any person, is not an end in himself, but simply a means of grace, a carrier of the goodness of God into the future, for generations still to come. That is worth celebrating.