

Approaching Calvin Today in “The Spirit of the Explorer”

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An address delivered at the Stated Meeting of the Salem Presbytery,
High Point, North Carolina on the 500th Anniversary of
John Calvin’s Birth, October 20, 2009.

A century ago at Union Seminary where I teach in Manhattan a public celebration was held in honor of the four hundredth anniversary of John Calvin’s birth. The speaker on that occasion in 1909, a distinguished theologian of the day, began his address by apologizing for the difficulty of saying anything original or new about Calvin. “There are,” he remarked, “certain great thinkers whose systems it is possible to approach in the spirit of the explorer, conscious as one turns each page of the chance of some new discovery; but with Calvin it is not so.”¹

I am happy to have this opportunity to be with you today because I have found this judgment not to be true. For some years it has been my privilege to offer a seminar on Calvin’s theology for graduate students. Most, but not all, are Presbyterians or members of the Reformed Church in America, and they enroll in the course not because they especially want to, but because they are trying to meet ordination requirements. They often begin the course with a sense of apprehension, sometimes even dread, because of the negative associations that have come to surround the mention of Calvin.

A typical example in my files is an editorial in *The New York Times* that once described the faltering prospects of a political candidate by saying that he sounded “buttoned-up, moral, serious to the point of sour,” in short, “like the model Calvinist” (*NYT*, 10/9/84).

One very bright and committed student a couple years ago may serve as an illustration of what I mean by beginning the study of Calvin with a sense of apprehension. Ian and his wife had just had their first child a few months before and were overjoyed at this birth of a beautiful little boy. When he agreed to give one of the first reports on the reading early in the course he did a power point presentation in which he showed the class pictures of this endearing child. And then flashing beneath them on the screen lines from Calvin that speak of “the whole human race delivered to the curse and degenerated, bound over to miser-

1 William Adams Brown, “Calvin’s Influence upon Theology,” *Three Addresses Delivered By Professors in Union Theological Seminary in Commemoration of the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of John Calvin*, Logos, 2009.

able servitude in which only damnable things come forth from its corrupt nature,” Ian said to us earnestly and with deep conviction: “I don’t care whether it is John Calvin or anyone else, no one is going to talk about my little boy like that!” We honored that reaction, knowing that he had not shirked his duty in reading the assigned material and preparing his presentation. I simply asked him not to suppress his anger but to try to keep open to the possibility of being surprised as we continued to read on.

Now without trying to paint too simple a picture, I know that Ian would not mind if I told you that by the end of the twelve weeks of the semester, he had indeed been overtaken by fresh discoveries. So much so that he wanted to share them with his local Presbyterian church in New Haven, Connecticut. He wrote for their Lenten booklet what he called *A Journey Through John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion* in which he selected brief passages for his parish’s daily meditation during Lent. In the preface he wrote these words: “This past fall, I took a course on John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, expecting to be somewhat bored and maybe even a little offended by Calvin...Calvin’s language of sin isn’t what we are used to as Presbyterians in the twenty-first century, and there are still passages in Calvin that are deeply troubling for even the most traditional theologian...(but) I was surprised to discover that Calvin has much to say—and much of it beautiful—about God, Jesus, Christianity, and so on. With my delighted surprise, the idea of this booklet was formed. May we all have a deep, contemplative, and blessed Lent.”

While it is undoubtedly the case that volumes have been written on almost every aspect of Calvin’s thought, it is false to assume that Calvin’s theology does not lend itself to a spirit of exploration and discovery. What gives the theological study of any text its originality and freshness is the quality of provocation which that text provides. Each new generation comes with the urgency of its questions seeking some response from a text. And to each generation a text poses certain questions of its own which offer a perspective not merely on the past, but on the present. The reason that some theological writings from the past continue to be read and others do not has to do with the extent to which these writings provoke us, and the quality of provocation they afford. Love them or hate them, they persist in confronting the explorer with a sort of impertinent pertinence. Thus the topic I have chosen for our time together this morning takes the words of this speaker from a hundred years ago and turns them around. I would like to reflect with you on “Approaching Calvin Today in ‘The Spirit of the Explorer.’”

I will refer primarily to John Calvin’s life-work titled *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. There are numerous other writings, most notably his commentaries on the Old and New Testaments, but the *Institutes* is his major theological work, one that he continued to develop through a number of editions in Latin and French for almost a quarter century, from 1536 to 1560. The final work was expanded to four books, the first two are about our knowledge of God (1) as Creator, and (2) as Redeemer. This is followed in Book 3 by a discussion of what is meant by grace and the effect it has on us, (the great theme of the Reformation), and concludes in Book 4 with practical matters that Calvin calls the “external means”

by which God invites us into the society of Christ and keeps us therein,” namely, questions about the church and civil government.

Knowledge of God, grace, and practical governance—three areas that I would like to select from briefly in a spirit of the explorer and ask you how you think these matters sound today. The point is not whether we find ourselves in agreement or disagreement with Calvin on a particular issue, but whether we have actually engaged his thinking and allowed his thinking in turn to engage our own.

BUT FIRST, A WORD ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL. WHO WAS THIS MAN, JOHN CALVIN, WHOSE INFLUENCE TO SOME EXTENT HAS AFFECTED US ALL, AND INDEED THE COURSE OF OUR CIVILIZATION? HIS DATES ARE FROM 1509–1564, A LIFETIME OF FIFTY-FIVE YEARS.

He was born about fifty miles north of Paris, in the region known as Picardy, in the town of Noyon. The atmosphere was primarily ecclesiastical. Life was lived in the shadow of the Cathedral, where Calvin’s father was an administrative officer, and the Bishop, who was of the nobility, ruled the city. Here Calvin lived until he was fourteen when he went off to study at the University of Paris. His mother had died when he was quite young, most likely when he was only four or five. A brother died at a young age, and a sister died in infancy, but three remaining siblings, Charles, Antoine, and Marie lived to adulthood. The latter two, his brother Antoine and sister Marie, in later life moved in with Calvin in his home in Geneva.

His father first had John study for the priesthood, then switch to law because it offered greater material benefits. For ten years from the time he is fourteen Calvin studied law and the classics, mainly at the University of Paris. His father lived to see Calvin earn his law degree in 1530, when he was twenty-two, but died the following year.

Paris was preeminent as a conservative stronghold at the time. But the influence of the Renaissance and the more radical ideas of German Lutheranism, though viewed with suspicion, were beginning to be felt. Many sought reforms in the church, but Lutheranism was seen as bringing political unrest into the French society of the time and was generally considered by the majority to be subversive. To call someone a “Lutheran” in Paris in Calvin’s day carried some of the same overtones as calling someone an “Islamic militant” today, or even a “terrorist.” There was a growing danger of warfare between the Lutheran territories and the Catholic princes.

TWO IMPORTANT EVENTS IN PARIS WHILE CALVIN WAS AT THE UNIVERSITY SHOW THE TENSION OF THE TIMES THAT INFLUENCED THE COURSE OF HIS LIFE.

One event was an uproar that arose at the installation of a new rector of the university in 1533, a man by the name of Nicolas Cop. In his inaugural address the new rector seemed to be defending Lutheran ideas by charging that many teachers at the university did nothing but “argue interminably...quarrel,....dispute

(and) discuss, but nothing about faith, nothing about the love of God, nothing about forgiveness of sins, nothing about grace, nothing about justification, (and) nothing about true works.” “I beg all of you here present,” Cop called forth, “never to sit back and accept these heresies, these insults against God.” The crowds became so infuriated by what they heard to be the “Lutheran” tone of this address that Cop was forced to flee for his life, as was Calvin, because Calvin not only was known to be Cop’s good friend, but it was widely thought, and may have been the case, that Calvin had in fact collaborated in the writing of the address. At any rate, warrants were issued by the ruling authorities of the Sorbonne and Parliament against Cop and Calvin, for whom the charge was that of accomplice, viz., “familiarity with the Rector.” They were accused of spreading Lutheran subversion and were forced to go underground into hiding for the year 1534.

Then also in 1534 the second event known as the incident of the Placards occurred which further raised the specter of terrorism in Paris. Overnight on October 18, 1534 handbills were secretly posted under the cover of darkness on public walls all around the city which called for a virtual uprising of the people against the clerical leaders and the order of the Mass. The Mass was attacked as a “pompous and proud” deception of the people led by thieving “fornicators” by which “the Lord is so outrageously blasphemed, and the people seduced and blinded” that “the world (if God does not soon provide a remedy)...will be totally desolated, ruined, lost, and laid low...” A severe crack-down by the authorities followed.

For almost a year, it seems, Calvin lived in hiding. During this period, in 1534 when he was twenty-five, he apparently broke his ties with the Roman Church. “...By a sudden conversion,” he later wrote, “(God) brought my mind to submission (and) I was...inspired by a taste of true religion...In less than a year, all who were looking for a purer doctrine began to come to learn from me, although I was a novice and a beginner.”

Calvin then fled from his native France, as did other refugees, thinking at first to make his way to Germany. But when he arrived in Switzerland he was sought out to lead a Reformed community in Geneva. Here he began the work on his *Institutes*, for the twofold and practical purpose—so he wrote in his dedicatory preface to the French king—to help provide instruction to those who were hungering and thirsting after Christ and also to defend the integrity of the witness of the protesting martyrs whose names were being slandered by those opposed to reform throughout France.

Calvin’s first stay in Geneva lasted only a couple years before the turmoil there drove him out. He moved to Strasbourg where he found the coveted leisure he had long sought to read and to study. Here he happily remains from 1538–1541, during which time he marries Idelette, a widow with two children, to whom he always referred with deep respect and affection: “The best companion of my life...,” he wrote, “From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance.” She died nine years after they were married, their offspring (one son or more, it is disputed) not having survived infancy. Calvin later announces publicly in a sermon that he has resolved never to remarry because of the time consuming difficulty of his ministerial responsibilities.

Much against his own inclinations in 1541 Calvin is called back to Geneva, “dragged back,” he describes it, after being terrified with the image of Jonah resisting God’s call to go to Nineveh. There he remains the virtual leader in active ministry for over twenty years, from 1541 until his death at fifty-five in 1564. By his instructions he was buried in an unmarked grave so that no veneration could be made of his remains and his enemies could not say that he had sought his own glory.

Two things particularly should be remembered when we consider Calvin’s theology against the background of his life. First, he is an individual who found his life directed in ways he never could have imagined, or planned for himself. Second, he remained always, in a sense, a fugitive and refugee amid civil unrest and insecurity, even in Geneva when thrust against his own desire into a public position of responsibility. From his *Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms*, one of the few places where he provides us with an autobiographical sketch, we read:

Then I, who was by nature a man of the country and a lover of shade and leisure, wished to find for myself a quiet hiding place—a wish which has never yet been granted me; for every retreat I found became a public lecture room. When the one thing I craved was obscurity and leisure, God fastened upon me so many cords of various kinds that he never allowed me to remain quiet, and in spite of my reluctance dragged me into the limelight.

For many of his teachings Calvin is indebted to the German Lutherans and earlier reformers, though he never met Martin Luther (1483–1546) personally, who was a generation older. Yet his theological writings were more orderly and comprehensive than any of the other Reformers, trained as he was in law and in the methods of the Renaissance humanists. As he continued to develop his *Institutes*, so did his knowledge develop of the theological writings in the earlier history of the church, especially those of Augustine.

What then is some of the provocation in his thought that can elicit fresh discoveries for those who may approach Calvin today in “the spirit of the explorer”?

(1) FIRST, THERE IS THE QUESTION OF HOW WE KNOW GOD. HERE CALVIN GIVES US SO MUCH TO CONSIDER IN LIGHT OF THE QUESTIONS OF OUR TIME.

“...To know God,” Calvin writes, is our chief end. “Even if a hundred lives were ours, this one aim would be sufficient for them all” (*Com.* on Jer. 9:24). We do not know ourselves, Calvin argues, until we know who God is. To know who God is, is to know who we are. Thus the knowing of God and the knowing of ourselves is inseparably related.

There is, in one respect, a knowing of God which is given simply with the fact that God has created us. There is a *sense* for deity which is part of our make-up as human beings. There is some acknowledgement in the human conscience of a power other than our own. The universal human tendency is to have a god. And God the creator of all things, Calvin holds, is presented to us in all of nature around us and in events which are taking place.

But this kind of knowing, this knowability if we may call it that, when viewed in light of faith in God shows itself to be a knowing that is frustrated and suppressed. This is a point at which Calvin's view becomes controversial. When God speaks to us through what the Old and New Testaments call the "Word of God," or in Calvin's terms, "the covenant of life," then whatever sense of the divine we may previously have had is shown to have been our way of avoiding God and suppressing the truth. Our religiousness becomes, in Calvin's words, a "factory manufacturing idols." In his French edition he refers to this factory of idols as a "boutique of idols." Being religious, therefore, is not necessarily the same as being faithful.

In Calvin's perspective God is everywhere before our very eyes, but we have exercised our natural religious tendencies to focus our attention in such a way as to blind ourselves to God's presence. "It is therefore in vain for us," Calvin writes, (*Ergo frustra nobis*) "that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author." (I,5,14). We are not aware of this until we hear what God's Word through Scripture is speaking to us of Jesus Christ.

Calvin's famous metaphor for how Scripture refocuses our religious sense for God is that of a pair of eyeglasses or corrective lenses. Looking through them we are able to see the world in focus, able, so to speak, to see God's work in all things, not just religion, able to see how deliberately blind to this work we have previously been. Our vision is corrected. We see what is going on all around us in current events very differently. When the focus of a camera is properly set to gauge the proper distance and proximity of a landscape, the picture we get is clear though there may be many details in it. But if the focus is off, the same camera can be held before the very same landscape, and the picture taken remains only a blur. Thus, the calling of the church is not to focus upon being religious as such, or even focus upon spirituality as such, but to focus upon the Word of God who is made known to us in what happens with Jesus.

When we hear what happens with Jesus as God's own Word speaking to us we come to know not simply that there is a God, or that there is something more ultimate than ourselves, we come to know ourselves as loved. This is what Calvin calls the knowledge of God the Redeemer. This is a remarkable part of his teaching that is often misrepresented. There are those, as we have mentioned, who associate Calvinism with a preoccupation with sin and evil, and there are passages in Calvin's *Institutes*, as my student Ian rightly pointed out, that lend themselves to this opinion. Talk of human degeneracy, damnable corruption of human nature, miserable bondage, obviously sounds like a morbid obsession with condemnation, and Calvin is heard by many accordingly. The self-understanding which results from such morbidity, some have objected, amounts finally to self-hatred.

Yet to explore what Calvin actually says can lead to hearing a very different message. For just as we only know that the picture we draw of God from creation is blurred after the focus provided by Christ in God's Word as eyeglasses enables us to recognize the true picture, so Calvin makes a similar interpretation of our knowledge of ourselves. That is to say, we only know our sin from knowing its forgiveness. We only can speak of our sickness from the standpoint of the remedy Christ brings. *In Calvin the negative is always seen from the standpoint of the positive, and not vice versa.* Calvin writes, "Since the Lord in coming to our aid bestows upon us what we lack, when the nature of his work in us appears, our destitution will, on the other hand, at once be manifest" (II,3,6). There is no danger, he argues, of one being too cast down and aware of one's failing *so long as*—and this is the crucial point—it is remembered that whatever is lacking is to be "recouped" in God (II,2,10). It is only in knowing God as our Redeemer, only in knowing how much we are loved, that we can realize how resistant we have been to being loved and how fallen away from that mercy our ways have been. Such a discovery, I suggest, is the opposite of morbidity or self-hatred.

2. SECOND, A WORD ABOUT HOW GOD'S GRACE TAKES EFFECT ON US. AND HERE CALVIN SPEAKS OF MATTERS THAT HAVE COME TO BE LINKED WITH HIS NAME, PROVIDENCE, ELECTION OR PREDESTINATION, AND OUR HUMAN WILL.

There are many issues that have been debated on these points. I once attended a university lecture in another school where the speaker said, "We must not think of God as some despot in the sky, an ego-maniac controlling all things and reducing human beings to robots or puppets. Such may be the god of John Calvin, but it need not be ours." It is the case that when we come to Calvin's discussions of the will of God in relation to grace we come upon some of the most problematic elements in his thought. While it is true that much of Calvin's teaching on this topic did not originate with him, but can be found in traditions of theology that preceded him, the single-minded emphasis which he gave to this subject has identified his name with it.

To cut to the bottom line of the matter, what Calvin wants most to affirm, when all is said and done, is that no part of God's creation is ever left merely to chance. Calvin's hearing of the Word of God is that God's knowing providence governs all things. Without trying to defend Calvin where his views become indefensible, we can note the train of thought which he develops. He is not unaware that the idea of God's providential will governing all things raises many questions. If all events somehow are governed by the will of God, then how does one avoid the conclusion that God is a despot in the sky and we are all manipulated puppets or pre-programmed robots mechanically carrying out our assigned functions?

Calvin's answers, which may or may not satisfy us, go as follows. The Scriptures speak of a God who rules over all the works of creation. This governance is in sharp contrast to the classical pagan myths of fortune, whose eyes are blind, of fate, or luck. To deny God's providence, in which a loving God provides as God

sees best, is to say that some things escape God's governing will and are subject to blind misfortune or fate. This Calvin will not accept. Among other things, it would make the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth," meaningless.

Yet Calvin insists that the providence which governs the world and all the events of our lives is often hidden to us. We simply cannot explain suffering or why tragedies happen as they do. What faith does confess is that nothing befalls us which is outside the will of God who works for good in all things. As Calvin sees it, this does not make us puppets because, following St. Augustine here, it is God's nature to work through us in such a way that God's working does not destroy our freedom but constitutes it. If we try to enforce our wills upon another, their freedom, to be sure, is violated and curtailed. But when it is God's love and freedom that is motivating us we are never more free than when we will what God wills. The human will is never violated by grace, but rather established in its integrity. Grace works through us in such a way that we are made free to love and work. God loves us into loving and frees us into freedom.

In addition to speaking of the grace of God's providence over all things, Calvin also discusses the will of God in electing those who are destined for salvation. Salvation comes not from any merit or capacity we possess, but is a sheer gift of God's grace. This is familiar church teaching, emphasized in the Reformation and developed by Augustine in the 5th Century. God elects people. People do not elect God. In developing his teaching on predestination and election Calvin is attentive to Paul's words in *Romans* and to these words from *Ephesians*: "He destined us in love to be his own through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (1:5-6).

In introducing the discussion of election Calvin simply begins with obvious facts. He observes that not all people have the "covenant of life" preached equally to them, and to those to whom the Gospel is preached, not all hear it as God speaking to them or respond with acceptance. That is simply a fact. Why this is, why some hear and others do not, why some respond to what they hear and others do not, Calvin makes it plain, we simply are not given to know. At this point many who otherwise tend to agree with Calvin's hearing of the Word of God wish he had stopped.

But, as Calvin expresses the matter, "We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know God's eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all in the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others" (III,21,1). Later Calvinists, such as Karl Barth, have criticized Calvin's understanding at this point in his positing of a "double decree," that is, that God wills the salvation of some to reveal grace and also wills the rejection of others to reveal God's righteous judgment against sin. Barth points instead to the words of the Apostle Paul, "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Cor. 15:22), and "God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy upon all" (Rom. 11:32).

3. FINALLY, A THIRD POINT OF CALVIN THAT HAS ARISEN AS A NEW DISCOVERY FOR SOME IN OUR DAY COMES FROM BK. 4 OF THE *INSTITUTES* WHERE CALVIN DEALS WITH THE PRACTICAL MATTERS OF CHURCH AND STATE GOVERNANCE.

In a sometimes previously overlooked discussion, Calvin raises the question of what kind of sexual requirements the Church should impose upon those seeking ordination as ministers. In his day the issue centered on the requirement of the Papal Church that to be ordained a priest one had to be celibate. But this general mandate stood in tension with a longer standing early church teaching that, according to the Gospel, celibacy is a gift of grace, just as covenants of marriage are a gift of grace. You can't coerce a gift. You can only accept it with thanksgiving or reject it. To reject God's gifts is, in the words of the Old and New Testaments, "to tempt the Lord your God" (Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7). In explicitly discussing sexuality in relation to ordination, Calvin writes, "But this is to tempt God: to strive against the nature imparted by him, and to despise his present gifts as if they did not belong to us at all" (IV,13,3).

It is an act of unfaithfulness, of infidelity, in the view of Calvin here articulated, for anyone to despise God's present gifts of the nature imparted by God of one's sexuality as if these gifts did not belong to one at all. This is a word from Calvin that is provoking discussion today as churches across denominations are being challenged as to whether they are "tempting God" by coercing people to strive against the nature imparted to them by God and to despise God's present gifts as if they did not belong to them at all.

ON THESE THREE POINTS REGARDING (1) OUR *KNOWING* OF GOD, (2) GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL AND ELECTING *GRACE*, AND (3) THE PRACTICAL MATTER OF *ORDINATION REQUIREMENTS*, AS WELL AS ON MANY OTHERS, CALVIN AFTER FIVE HUNDRED YEARS CONTINUES TO PROVOKE THE THINKING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, IN AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT, BUT IN EVER FRESH EXPLORATION AND NEW DISCOVERY.

Contrary to the press he often receives, Calvin the refugee, whether consistently or inconsistently, is first and foremost, a theologian seeking to bear witness to a *love* of God so incredible in embracing all creation that it is, finally, "beyond all we can ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). This is the word he leaves us:

We ought to embrace the whole human race
without exception in a single feeling of love; here there
is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and
unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated
in God, not in themselves (II,8,55).