

Calvin and Piety

While global celebrations take place to mark the Darwin anniversaries this year, the church quietly, but significantly celebrates the legacy of John Calvin 500 years after his birth. That legacy is far richer and broader than many people imagine and has made a far greater impact not merely on the church, but also on life and culture around the world than is often acknowledged. But out of the many aspects of Calvin's legacy that will be discussed and debated throughout this year, there is one that stands out more than others that will probably be given less attention than it deserves and that is his emphasis on piety.

It comes out at the beginning of the second chapter of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* – his most famous work. There he says, 'We shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety'. When he speaks of 'piety' in that context he means, as indicated in the footnote of the Battles edition of *Institutes*, that in which 'reverence and love for God are joined'.

The genius of Calvin is not his theology merely as a summary of the Bible's teaching, but in the fact that Calvin saw so clearly that truth and life belong together. To use the language of Peter, what God teaches us in his Word and has provided for us in his Son and by his Spirit is 'everything we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us' (2Pe 1.3). The whole purpose of the truth God has revealed in Scripture is to transform lives: to bring the lost to salvation and then to build them up as saints in the family of God.

It is, of course, at this point that so much that goes under the name of 'Calvinism' has lost its way. For some it has become an academic label which defines a particular kind of theology; but in so doing has become dry and academic and an end in itself. For others it is nothing more than a tradition to which they adhere and ends up feeling like a relic from the past. The true heritage of Calvin is neither of these things. It is always living and vibrant, approaching the task of theology with this combination of reverence and love for God that humbles us before his Word and draws us into a richer deeper relationship with God through its truth.

Such piety will have a necessary impact on worship – approaching God with reverence and awe – but only doing so because in a deeper sense it makes an impact on life itself. It is through the 'renewing of our minds' as Paul says, that our lives are transformed – not just by being broken out of the mould of a fallen world, but 'changed from one degree of glory into another' in the ongoing process of sanctification that prepares us for heaven.

Historically this mark of authentic Calvinism filtered into the Reformation in Holland, but also into Britain under the influence of the Puritans. If there was one thing that gave them their particular distinctive – in a way that cut across ecclesiastical and social boundaries – it was their passion for 'experimental religion'. That is, a religion that shapes life and experience in all their different dimensions. That heritage has outlived the Puritans in the lives and ministries of many of the great preachers who God has used in the centuries since.

The contemporary relevance of this is twofold. Negatively it comes as a challenge to much that sees itself as Neo-Calvinism. Whereas we must surely rejoice at the resurgence of interest in reformed theology that has been witnessed globally over the past 50 years, too much of it has been confined to academic theology. It is scholarly and erudite, but if it does not fill us with love for God and wonder at his word and works, then there is something wrong. If we are truly engaging with God as he has made himself known, then we must be

brought to our knees before him in wonder, love and praise. True Calvinism is both experiential and doxological. If it does not feed my soul and inspire heartfelt praise, then it is no true heir of the man who gave it its name.

Positively it challenges us to see the way Reformed theology should impact every area of life. It has been said that for Calvin, ‘All life is religion’, and that is true. His theology shaped not only his preaching and pastoral ministry, but also his civic involvement and the ministries of mercy with which he was involved in Geneva. Sadly that kind of full-orbed Calvinism has often not been reflected in those who claim to be his followers. More often than not, they have been content to embrace a Calvinistic soteriology under the banner of TULIP, while having little appreciation of the broader implications of his theology. (It is doubtful if Calvin would have recognised himself in that 17th Century acronym.) Yet, when we begin to appreciate the far-reaching impact of his summary of the Bible’s teaching – especially as expressed in the *Institutes* – that we realise how much it addresses major areas of deficiency in the church generally at the present time.

For those churches that seek authenticity and experience at the expense of doctrine, Calvin reminds us that experiential Christianity is found in the truth that sets us free. For those who hunger for worship that is not merely formal, Calvin shows us what it is to worship God ‘in spirit and in truth.’ For those who preach the gospel, but at the expense of ministering to the needs of the poor, Calvin shows us the importance of mercy ministry as a necessary expression of God’s care for the world through his church. For those who lament the state of the nation, Calvin reminds God’s people that the church is not an evangelical monastery, but must function as salt and light at every possible level – the common denominator in all these things being heartfelt and life-changing reverence and love for God.

So, in the midst of the many things that will dominate the Calvin celebrations this year, his concern for evangelical piety should be to the fore!