

John Calvin, God's Attorney
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Romans 5:1-11

A seminary professor who taught me a great deal about preaching urged his students to subject our sermons to the "So what" test; that is, after every paragraph (and he sometimes picked out single sentences of our oh-so-painstakingly-written drafts) ask the question "So what?" Believe me, credit Dr. Atwood for significantly shortening the length of my sermons to this day! I confess to having struggled with that test as I prepared for today's sermon. What difference does a theologian born 500 years ago make to us, living in a culture and church so unlike his? Why should we devote time and energy to culling wisdom, embedded in the arcane style of another era, from his massive *Institutes of the Christian Religion*? Most of us can identify John Calvin as a theological giant of the Protestant Reformation and an important forebear of the Presbyterian Church (as opposed to the mischievous boy in the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip). *So what?*

Some will point to the importance of historical continuity: to receive inherited thought and practice and conserve the identity carved out for us. American representative democracy works best, for example, with citizens who share its essential values and understand its constitutional rights and responsibilities. Each succeeding generation can trust that history; we don't have to reinvent the wheel every four years. In the same way, Presbyterians draw upon our theological heritage as the foundation for what we believe and what we do. I've come to see that understanding church history helps us evaluate other perspectives, and new ideas and trends as they emerge. Our criteria for assessing the truth of the latest best-selling book or spiritual guru or perspective on ordination debates include their correspondence (or lack of correspondence) with the principles and values developed by

the Reformed Church through the ages. We don't have to reinvent our faith every generation. We have foundations we can trust to remind us of our distinct identity and to make clear the ways Presbyterian theology is different from that of Roman Catholic, or what is preached at Parkside, or by Joel Osteen. Notice I didn't say "better" than any of those, but just "different." It's the joy and the responsibility of the Church to shape its worshiping and serving life according to both its heritage and the lively, contemporary movement of the Holy Spirit. We are the church reformed, and always to be reformed. But, unless we understand where we've come from, how can we know what it means to be Presbyterian, and what unique perspectives on belief and practice spring from that heritage? There is no better way to cut to that chase than through the witness of John Calvin.

The morning Scripture text reflects the heart of Reformation theology: justification (or salvation) by grace alone, mediated through Jesus Christ--- and its counterpoint: no human action or virtue, no amount of work or righteous behavior, can repair the relationship between us and God, broken through our own rebellion. It is sheer gift, coming to us from Christ by grace. This affirmation and its consequences constituted the driving force behind the Protestant break with the Roman Catholic Church, and the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans provided its most important argument. A reading from that letter, in the fifth chapter at the first verse. Listen for God's Word.
[ROMANS 5:1-11]

Some glimpses into the life of the reformer:

A worship service true to Calvin's practice would have no organ, no choir, no bells or other instruments. It was not that he didn't appreciate good music; he simply valued Scripture more. Calvin believed that public praise in church should be confined to the language of the Bible—mainly the Psalms-- sung in unison without ornamentation that might distract the people from the meaning of the words. [*Erik Routley, Calvin's Psalters: 1539-62*] It's a little ironic that hymns by Calvin found in our hymnal are unfamiliar to us, so they'll be sung

this morning....by our choir, with organ accompaniment. On the other hand, Calvin would be happy to see that our service today includes the Lord's Supper (at 11: until he learned that we celebrated it only once a month). He believed the preached Word and the sacramental Word belonged together. He never could get the elders of Geneva to agree with him on that point, however. They complained that weekly communion was too similar to the Roman Catholic mass, and that it took too much time away from the sermon!

Calvin had a practical approach to evangelism. It is said that when he arrived in Geneva there were more bars than any other European city. So he opened a "reformed pub," with beer and wine. . . . and Bible study. A precursor to our "theology on tap!"

He advocated for social as well as theological reform. One example is passage of a law requiring individuals and businesses to erect guard rails which significantly reduced the number of accidents caused by people falling off outside stairs and roofs. He was an attorney, after all! *[the preceding two anecdotes are related by Jock Stein in World Alliance of Reformed Churches, December 2008]*

Calvin was called to church leadership in Geneva the same year he published the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a comprehensive and systematic exposition of Protestant theology that is still the gold standard of reformed thought. He was 27 years old. Makes you wonder how different church history would be if Genevan leaders had doubted the gifts and vision of someone so young---and what the contemporary church is doing to nurture and learn from youthful perspectives.

Most artistic renderings of Calvin depict him at the end of his life—he died at the age of 55---with a long gray beard and a dour expression. While he did suffer from stomach ailments, insomnia, tuberculosis, and hemorrhoids, which might account for the pained demeanor, he loved life and lived it with passion

and joy. Calvin saw the praise of God as the purpose of human life, and insisted there was not one blade of grass, no shade of color in this world, that was not intended to make us rejoice. The God he worshiped and served was a God of abundance. In his commentary on the Romans text we read this morning, he wrote, *However many blessings we expect from God, His infinite liberality will always exceed all our wishes and our thoughts.*

Calvin was born in France to middle class parents who made sure he received the best possible education. His father originally hoped his son would become a priest, but after a falling-out with his local cathedral, insisted that John become a lawyer instead. Calvin's legal studies expanded his knowledge beyond religion to the sciences, and played a crucial role in his exposure to the renewal movement in the church initiated by Martin Luther. He was clearly attracted to this Protestant perspective. His father's death in a state of excommunication from the Roman Catholic church on trumped-up charges, further solidified young Calvin's resistance to the church's absolute authority. He moved to Geneva, Switzerland and for twenty-three years presided over the intellectual and spiritual center of the reformed church. He consistently emphasized the importance of universal education, founded schools and a university, and established a library of surprising breadth. Possessed of a keen mind, broad humanistic as well as religious education, superior oratory skills, and voluminous writing output, Calvin was a formidable advocate of this new thinking.

I say "formidable" intentionally because we cannot consider Calvin's contributions without acknowledging their shadow side. In that era, no freedom of conscience existed to affirm doctrines that deviated from church teachings. Religious tolerance was unthinkable. The confession of faith was holy and its purity was considered of greater value even than mortal life. People found guilty of heresy on a sufficiently important tenet of faith could be legally executed. Such was the case with Michael Servetus, whose views on the Trinity

were deemed heretical for seeming to deny the divinity of Christ. Calvin himself testified at the trial and agreed with both verdict and sentence. Though he never repudiated the action in his life time, I can't help but wonder if the experience and Calvin's reflection upon it contributed to development of one of the essentials of reformed faith: that God alone is Lord of the conscience, even, sometimes in opposition to church teaching and "orthodoxy." This shadow on Calvin's legacy is a potent reminder of how limited in view is even the most visionary among us, and calls the church in every age to humility with respect to our knowledge, openness to the perspectives of others, and grace to change in light of new insights and awareness.

So what is Calvin's legacy on the ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church, and for the faith of individual believers today? I'm looking forward to a fuller exploration of these themes during our Lenten study on Wednesday evenings in March, and invite you to join me then. For now, I simply want to summarize what I see are among his most important and enduring contributions.

*An understanding of the grace of God as inspiring human effort, not negating it. We stand continually in need of God's grace, but the assurance of it through Jesus Christ moves us to gratitude and from gratitude to dynamic service in the world. Such a perspective spurred Calvin toward a social gospel that imparted responsibility for the wider community beyond the individual believer. Departing from the viewpoint of many Reformers, for example, Calvin approved the practice of usury, of charging interest on borrowed money. He is sometimes called the spiritual father of capitalism, but his writings emphasize wealth creation not for personal gain, but for the common good. Just as the need for divine grace is universal, so is its blessing. *No one, he wrote, is excluded from calling upon God, the gate of salvation is set open to all; neither is there any other thing which keep us back from entering in, save only our own unbelief.* Notice the dynamic tension

preserved between God's free gift of grace and God's command to love and serve. We trust....and obey!

*Calvin helped free the church from authoritarian hierarchy, so that Christians might more directly hear God speaking to them through the Scriptures. This was a wide departure from the ironclad control by which the Roman Catholic church ruled, and delivered more power into the hands of the laity. He envisioned a church in which elders and deacons shared governance with ministers. Calvin himself came to see the down side of this when his own perspectives were opposed by the Genevan elders! Yet he remained committed to the idea that God's Spirit works in the hearts and minds of individual believers, enabling them to hear God's Word in the Bible, and helping them respond faithfully. Ultimate authority and power rested not in the church or its leaders, but in Jesus Christ, who alone is head of the church.

*And finally, Calvin proclaimed a glorious and powerful God who rules over all. This is the foundation for Calvin's view of predestination, which has far less to do with an individual's eternal destiny, and more to do with God's intention to redeem the whole creation. Human sin and our tendency toward it threatens and deforms life. But because God is sovereign, we can live with courage and hope:

*Seeing that a Pilot steers the ship in which we sail,
who will never allow us to perish even in the midst
of shipwrecks, there is no reason why our minds
should be overwhelmed with fear and overcome with
weariness.*

Thanks be to God!

Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, The Library of Christian Classics, edited by John T. McNeill, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, eighth printing, 1977.

Much of the source material for this sermon was drawn from The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin, edited by Donald K. McKim.

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