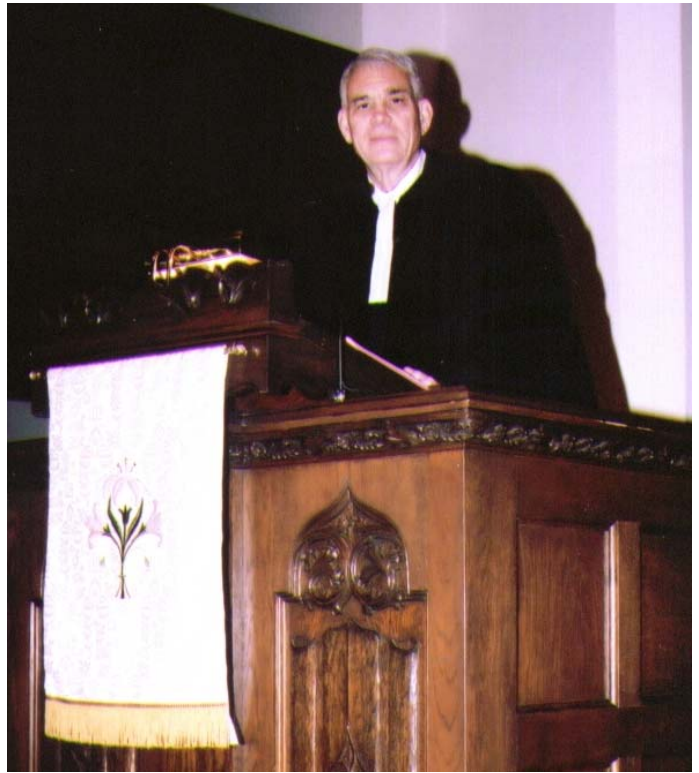


Sunday, May 17, 2009

A Visit from John Calvin (a.k.a.: Alex Currie)

Good morning,

As most of you probably know by now we are in the process of recognizing the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, one of the most significant figures in the history of the Presbyterian Church. As a part of this recognition Brent asked if I would give a short presentation on Calvin. For those of you who remember the presentation of Jonathan Edward's sermon Sinners in the hands of an angry God and are still troubled by nightmares from that experience, this is not a sermon. Rather, I would like to imagine what Calvin would have to say about the reformation and the early reformed church if he were able to return today – a sort of Presbyterian Chautauqua - and also reflect on how Calvin is still important to Presbyterian thought. For those of you who are better historians than I am and know that Calvin was only about five foot six inches, just imagine that he is standing on a ten inch riser to make his presence more formidable – which is something Calvin might have done in 1550.



So now, listen as John Calvin speaks.....

All of us sometimes feel that we live in troubled times. Northern Europe in the 16th century, the world into which I was born, was a vast and doubtful place. At the time we were not certain about the shape and size of the earth, most of the world was uncharted, and the ruler of the world was God the creator. There were few dependable scientific laws; instead we credited much of what happened in the world to divine omnipotence. If the crops were good it was because man's behavior pleased God –if the world saw drought and famine mankind must be feeling God's retribution for our sinful ways. The one certainty that we held on to was that the sinful man could be redeemed to the heavenly kingdom, and that the material world was just a trial ground for our faithfulness.

Over the previous 200 years before I was born Europe had fallen on hard times. England and France seemed to always be at war. English nobles are constantly fighting over the crown. Trading ships brought the Black Death from the East, killing over one-third of the population. Many who did not die from the plague died from starvation.

As a result, by the time I was born fear was everywhere. The greatest fear, the fear that one would spend an eternity in hell rather than an eternity in paradise, was *the* incentive for righteous living. Human virtue was constantly being measured publicly, and a lack of virtue publicly punished. Children were thrashed, servants and apprentices whipped by their masters. Criminals were tortured, murderers boiled in oil. Traitors were hanged, and heretics burned at the stake. Often these public punishments were accompanied by pious rejoicing by those who considered themselves more virtuous. It was into this world that the reformation was born, and just as all of you today are influenced by your environment, we leaders of the reformation were no different. It must also be remembered that we were reformers, not revolutionaries. We saw no need to change the culture of the time; rather we saw a need to change the structure of the existing church and free it from its corruption.

The German Martin Luther, as you must know, began the great religious reformation. At the time of his birth in 1483, the world was on the point of turning. A new spirit was emerging out of what you now call the Middle Ages – life was growing easier and some people - especially the educated - were questioning the old superstitions and fears. Once this process of questioning began it was inevitable that people would begin to re-examine the whole fabric of their religious faith. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks sent a flood of Greek scholars to our institutes of learning here in Europe, bringing with them the ideas of classical antiquity and, most importantly, the New Testament in the original Greek. As

they translated these texts scholars began to find discrepancies between these new translations and the Latin Vulgate, which had been the accepted version of the Bible since the 6th century.

The most significant effect of the revival of ancient learning was a new attitude about we human beings and our place in the world. In the past century if a man was successful it was viewed as a result of divine will – now some are seeing it as a result of one’s own efforts. This new thought – combined with the new scholarship – produced a new idea about the relationship between faith and reason. In the past theology was built on the belief that knowledge of God was available by reason, and we had trusted in the power of our minds to understand the ways of God. Now, in the 16th century, we are not so sure.

AS I’m sure you must know, by Martin Luther’s time a key grievance against the Catholic Church was the idea of penitence, or the repenting of one’s sins, and a follow-on act of penance, such fasting or a pilgrimage, which publicly demonstrated your true repentance. In Luther’s time it had become common to substitute a cash payment for an act of penance, a practice that had become more and more corrupt. Oddly enough, Luther, a catholic priest and scholar, was not touched by early talk of church reform – he was too busy worrying about his own salvation. But as a priest, listening to confessions, he was dismayed by how little remorse people had for their sins, and how eager they were to escape punishment. One day, while preparing for his lectures, he found the words of Paul in the Book of Romans. “The just shall live by faith.” To Luther, and I quote him now –“God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith.” Luther had reasoned that the righteousness of God is based on mercy. God gives mercy – it cannot be purchased or earned by acts of penance.

This simple statement of faith and mercy led to a great splitting of Christendom into several denominations that became known as the reformed churches. I am proud to say that in Switzerland the Swiss were the first to develop the ideas generated by Luther. The Swiss were a sturdy and resourceful people – not to mention proudly independent. They had a remarkable degree of democracy for our time. In short, Switzerland was a fertile breeding ground for reform.

Although I am thought of as Swiss, I was born in Noyon, a cathedral town in northern France. My father sent me to study law at Orleans, where I fell under the influence of evangelical literature and began consorting with reformers, gradually adopting Protestant ideas. In 1534, during a period of persecution of reformers by the French king, I left France for Basel, Switzerland.

In Basel, I wrote The Institutes of the Christian Religion, which in all modesty I note has been proclaimed the most powerful influence on the Reformation ever written – more powerful even than any single work of Luther. The Institutes were simply a logical presentation of reform beliefs. I fully admit that there were no original ideas in the book – I simply took the views of centuries of Christian writers that came before me and, as a good lawyer, codified them into a logical system. There was, however, a significant difference between Luther and me. Luther, who I view as somewhat of a weakling, continued to envision an eminently merciful God. I, on the other hand, saw a God of absolute sovereignty. I did not deny Luther’s idea of salvation by the grace of God; I simply gave an omnipotent God the power to choose who was to be saved – a doctrine of the elect.

In the Institutes I also dealt with the relationship between the church and the state. Simply put. I decreed that man has two allegiances – to civil law and the rule of God. However, since obedience to God takes priority, civil law must necessarily reflect the teachings of the church, and that it is the responsibility of Christians to ensure that the laws do just that.

After publishing the Institutes, I intended to travel to Strasbourg, to devote myself to study and writing. En route I stopped in Geneva – intending to stay only a night. There I met another French reformist – William Farel. He urged me to stay in Geneva. I was reluctant. Farel threatened me with the curse of God if I refused. So I stayed. Soon after I was elected to be a preacher; shortly after that I was appointed a professor of divinity. I now had primary responsibility for providing worship, pastoral care, religious instruction, and administrative oversight for a city of over 10,000. I am 27 years old.

Over the next twenty –three years I established an austere regime in Geneva – and regime is truly the word, for there have been few kings and queens in history that could wield the power that I had in Geneva. The city appointed a commission, with me, naturally, at the head, to draw up a legislative code. The result was the Ecclesiastical Ordinances, a sort of constitution for the Reformed Church. We divided the church into a hierarch, the clergy at the top, and laymen below them. If a new pastor wished to preach, he needed the approval of the incumbent clergy, the magistrates, and, in theory,

the congregation. This was the beginnings of democracy in the reformed church, but in practice the congregation took little part. I left it to later reformers to expand on this idea.

In Geneva, the law was the Bible, the pastors were the interpreter of the law, and the civil government was obliged to enforce the law as the pastors interpreted it. Elders inspected every house once a year; a member of the congregation could be summoned at any time to account for his actions. Offenders might be excommunicated and shunned by the congregation, although they were expected to continue to attend sermons for their enlightenment. As my power grew, and it truly was power, I came to see any opposition to my rule as the work of the devil, and I became as harsh as the Church of Rome in suppressing heresy. I had the complete support of influential citizens. The good Swiss, steeped in patriotism and who already suffered from the sin of pride for overthrowing the French dukes who had ruled them, had no trouble accepting the proud belief that the concept of God's elect applied directly to them.



Of course, nothing lasts forever, and my power eventually ended with my death. Looking back, I confess that I'm surprised that I was so successful as a reformer. In truth in many ways there was little difference between the reformed church and the Catholic faith we wanted to change. The infallibility of the Pope simply became the infallibility of God's clergy—who were of course among the elect. Power that once was in the hands of the local priests now became the power of the pastors and the city council. I admit that I was irrational and merciless in the punishment of small offenses. Criminals were still harshly punished—I had a child beheaded for striking his mother—and heretics, most notably the Spaniard Michael Servetus—were still burned at the stake. The French philosopher Voltaire noted that my philosophy did not produce any improvements over the intolerance of previous religions. My only defense is that this harshness was entirely in keeping with the barbarianism of the age. For the ordinary citizen there were some distinct advantages to accepting this reform. The orderliness that came with the reform movement helped to promote the rise of trade and the merchant class, and while I could be harsh with individuals I had

a genuine love for humanity, and I worked hard to institute policies to care for the poor and improve the daily life of ordinary citizens. In truth, however, I suspect that it was the idea of being God's elect that kept the reform movement going—there's nothing like a stroke of the ego to bring about agreement with otherwise incomprehensible actions.

Perhaps the best reason to commemorate the 500th year of my birth is the focus I gave to the new reformed movement. I must stress that the reformation happened because people genuinely cared about the church. They were not turning from the church; they simply were not happy with the intertwining of the church and political power. The church was very much a part of the lives of the people, and they wanted to see their lives lived out in the church in a way that they thought was right in their eyes. I was, in all modesty, a born organizer, and through my writings and preaching I was able to compact and mature the reform ideas of the times into a corporate whole that those wanting change could grasp hold of. The idea of God's divine sovereignty was easy to understand, and the fact that by accepting my teachings you could consider yourself one of God's elect did nothing to hurt the spread of these ideas.

During my time in Geneva the city was home to many refugees from Catholic persecution, among them the Scotsman John Knox. I was a prolific preacher and lecturer. These refugees heard my lectures, and as they gradually returned to their native countries they carried with them the impressions made by both my doctrines and the sheer force of my personality. As a result of my life's efforts the reform movement traveled across Europe, most notably to the Netherlands, England, and Scotland, and later to the new world as a number of reform sects sought religious freedom. Political historians have recognized my contributions to the development of representative democracy in general and the American system of government in particular, with my doctrine of sin and a pessimistic view of man justifying a strong system of checks and balances. Your current system of ordained ministers balanced with lay deacons and elders is a direct legacy of my views and one that was firmly established in the Scottish church by Knox. My ideas on Christian liberty have been said to contribute generally to the religious freedom and openness of industrial societies. As to my doctrine of the elect, contemporary scholars have been kinder to me than my immediate peers, interpreting the doctrine in a gentler, more compassionate light to mean that it is all of humanity that is elected to God's grace. They also have focused on my writings on the Holy Spirit, my belief that the way we access and are united with Christ is not so much through our own efforts as it is through the workings of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and that the Church exists not for its own sake, but to nurture all of God's people

In summary, it must be fairly said that like all men, I had strengths and weaknesses. I was not truly as harsh as history often makes me out to be – you need only to turn to page 457 of your hymnal and reads the words “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art” to get a sense of deep relationship with Christ that I hoped for all people. Those who say I ignored the parables of Jesus and had too little sympathy for mankind to temper my strong will and brains are probably correct. At the time we were more concerned about the fate of a man’s soul for eternity and did not worry ourselves that the individual sinner might be cold and hungry while he lived. Those who credit my organization and preaching with the spread of the reform church are also correct. Without me the reform movement might have taken an entirely different turn. In this the 500th anniversary of my birth it is my hope that Christians today will forgive my harshness, my lack of compassion, and my need for power and remember me as one who brought organization and democracy to the later church. After 500 years of reflection I might even be willing to concede that Martin Luther was correct – God’s mercy *is* for all. Since I cannot go back and change the way I was, I will leave it to you to remember the parables and continue to work to keep compassion and care for humanity as the focus of the modern church.