

John Calvin: His Importance Today

By Malcolm H. Watts

John Calvin is recognised as one of the foremost leaders - if not the foremost leader - of the great Reformation. During his life-time his teaching affected hundreds of thousands of fellow believers; and today, more than ever, the effect of Calvin and Calvinism is felt throughout the world.

Calvin was, in the first place, the theologian of the Word. The underlying assumption in all that he taught was that Scripture, God's Word written, was God-breathed, absolutely inerrant and authoritative. "Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of

God were heard." The modern Church desperately needs to recover the Reformer's doctrine of Scripture and so to present the Gospel that men, inwardly enlightened by the Spirit, may discern God's "majesty" and "glory"; man's "corruption and depravity" - as "plunged into this deadly abyss,...not only burdened with vices, but...utterly devoid of all good"; and Christ's "love", "submitting himself even as the accused, to bear and suffer all the punishments they ought to have sustained". Then, by grace and power, elect sinners will be enabled to "receive him as he is offered by the Father" and thus "dare with contrite hearts to stand in God's sight." Let the world hear this Truth. It is the only Truth: it is Bible, Reformation Truth.

Secondly, Calvin was the theologian of the life. He stressed "piety" - "that reverence joined with love of God" which inevitably leads to "willing service." True piety, therefore, will mean life lived under the guidance of God: a life of constant obedience. For Calvin, this alone can properly

death, "I now unhesitatingly testify that every Christian may find in this man the noble pattern of a truly Christian life and Christian death."

Thirdly, Calvin was the theologian of the heart. Spiritual experience really began for him when "by a sudden conversion,

“by a sudden conversion, God subdued and brought my heart to docility”

be called "the life of the Christian man". Essentially, it includes "self-denial" (giving up control of our lives, that we may be devoted to his will) and "bearing the cross" (seeking to be conformed to the Lord Jesus Christ, even through suffering and sorrow), that, by the further means of "meditation of the future life" and "using the present life and its helps", we may continue in our "pilgrimage" towards "the Heavenly Kingdom." Calvin still teaches those prepared to hear him that the Christian life is a consecrated life, subject to the Law as the perfect rule and characterized in every part with holiness and purity. His emphasis is surely needed in these days when, tragically, many are lowering their standards, compromising with the world, and failing to evidence true and vital Godliness. Moreover, what Calvin taught as his doctrine, he exemplified in his life. Theodore Beza witnessed the way he lived for sixteen years and he could write after Calvin's

God subdued and brought my heart to docility". Thereafter, as he grew in grace, he discovered that the Lord graciously admits us to "greater familiarity with himself". "How then is it possible for thee", he once wrote, "to know God, and to be moved by no feeling?" When under "the heavy affliction" of his wife's death, he was able to write to Farel that the grief would "certainly have overcome me had not He who raises up the prostrate, strengthens the weak, and refreshes the weary, stretched for His hand from heaven to me"; and when in his final illness he was informed that Farel, his dear friend, was determined to visit him, Calvin sent word to him not to make the arduous journey; and then, testifying to a "felt" Christ, he adds, "My respiration is difficult, and I am about to breathe the last gasp, happy to live and die in Jesus Christ...I bid you, and all my brethren, my last adieu". Calvin was profoundly experimental. He would have had no sympathy whatsoever with

that contemporary "Calvinism" which despises the spiritual feelings of the heart, Instead, he would surely impress on us - we who are so lacking in life within - that the vital essence of authentic Calvinism is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

Today, under the Divine blessing, Calvin's influence could once again be the means of reviving doctrinal, practical and experimental Christianity, to the blessing of God's Church and to the glory of his most excellent and worthy Name.

"The 'five points of Calvinism'...are each and every one of them, essential elements in the Calvinistic system, the denial of which in any of their essential details, is logically the rejection of the entirety of Calvinism; and in their sum they provide what is far from being a bad epitome of the Calvinistic system. The sovereignty of the election of God, the substitutive definiteness of the atonement of Christ, the inability of the sinful will to good, the creative energy of the saving grace of the Spirit, the safety of the redeemed soul in the keeping of its Redeemer, - are not these the distinctive teachings of Calvinism, as precious to every Calvinist's heart as they are necessary to the integrity of the system?...Clearly at the root of the stock which bears these branches must lie a profound sense of God, and an equally profound sense of the relation in which the creature stands to God, whether conceived merely as creature or more specifi-

cally as sinful creature. It is the vision of God and His Majesty, in a word, which lies at the foundation of the entirety of the Calvinistic thinking. ...The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled, on the one hand, with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God's sight, as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and, on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners. He who believes in God without reserve, and is determined that God shall be God to him, in all his thinking, feeling, willing - in the entire compass of his life activities, intellectual, moral, spiritual - throughout all his individual, social, religious relations - is, by the force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist." - Professor Benjamin B. Warfield (1909)