

CALVIN FOR LUTHERANS

Jon Delmas Wood

Anniversaries prompt speculations about who we are, how our paths have crossed, and what we imagine for a shared future. Preparing for the five hundredth anniversary of Calvin's birth in 2009 is also such an occasion. It was in the town of Noyon in Picardie, where Charlemagne once was hailed as king of the Franks, that John Calvin was born in the summer of 1509. By then, the old Carolingian empire had long since grown in different directions. Cultural differentiations were so well recognized that contemporary biblical commentators felt justified interpolating new categories into the famous description of God's coming kingdom: there will be neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, neither German nor French!¹ One can make too much of the sociogenetic discord, but a certain amount of cultural clash remains between the religious heirs of the Reformation in their efforts to assess the Calvinist heritage.

By now the past several decades of ecumenical discussion have successfully broadened the perception of the Reformed tradition, and the name "Reformed" as a family tree no longer stands or falls with Calvin himself.² To be Reformed already means that at least two potentially divergent branches—the "Zwinglian" and the "Calvinist"—have been grafted together. Perhaps this Reformed habit of grafting has led the way in my own life toward self-consciously claiming the Reformed tradition while growing fond of Lutheran liturgy and hymnody during my time in Strasbourg, France, and Princeton, New Jersey. One consequence of this prolonged proximity to the intersections of Reformed and Lutheran identities has been a growing desire to smooth out some of the rougher edges between us.

The Leuenberg Concord of 1973 did a commendable job of laying out common ground with respect to the gospel and those prickly doctrinal points of contention including the Lord's Supper, christology, and predestination. This document established a degree of mutual recognition of ministry of word and sacrament among Lutheran, Cal-

vinist, and Zwinglian communities in Europe. In general, however, and as Leuenberg itself attests, the specific worshipping communities tend to persist in sharp awareness of the contrasts among themselves. Lutherans are still taught how to assert and defend confessional distinctives such as God's suffering on the cross and the nature of Christ's presence in the supper, and how to parade double predestination and the so-called *extra calvinisticum* as spoils of theological war. Reformed Calvinists for their part tend to frame their arguments with ostensibly neutral terms like "consubstantiation," all the while leaving the not-so-subtle impression that Lutherans have failed to reform the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. This kind of identity warfare can often end with recourse to the red button of Protestant polemics: "Well, I'd rather be a Catholic than a Calvinist." At that, even the most hardened of the Reformed will be reduced to flummoxed agitation. I am not here attempting to commemorate such controversies, any more than I aim to make a lawyerly plea to persuade one party to abandon its identity. But an anniversary celebration calls for some recognition of our less than charitable habits, if we hope for an amicable future.

People attuned to politics will recognize that any ideological contest relies on persuasiveness. A campaign to attract would-be partisans never relies on mere data. It is debatable as to whether people can or even should attempt to be utterly objective. The seamy side of persuasiveness, however, is its

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"attack ads" that, despite their general lack of accuracy, have a way of insinuating themselves into group consciousness. Many of the anti-Calvin myths go back to attack ads, as it were, of Calvin's own day.³ Such myths have been elaborated in snippets and in whole cloth for centuries now. John Calvin often appears in general perception as the severe Swiss theocrat of Geneva. Between Lutherans and the Reformed of a Calvinist bent, traditions of religious conviction are reinforced by centuries of hardened differentiation that has much to do with the very different politi-

cal models that prevailed and often gave protective mantles to religious communities. Perhaps, therefore, a modest sketch of Calvin's biography and circumstances can add some humane touches to the stereotypically harsh portrait.

At the outset, one should note that John Calvin was not Swiss. He was not born Swiss, he never became Swiss, and he did not die Swiss. Born a Picard in northern France, Calvin lived an itinerant life as a scholar and then as an evangelical refugee in major cities of France such as Paris, Orléans, Bourges, and in the duchy of Ferrara in northern Italy as well as in Strasbourg (on what was then the edge of the German Empire), and in Basel and Geneva.⁴ Although now famously associated one with the other, Calvin only lived in the Genevan city-state from 1536 to late 1538 and from late 1541 until his death in 1564, and at the time Geneva itself was not Swiss.⁵ The Genevan city council in the 1530s referred to this humanist lawyer from Picardie namelessly, and probably derisively, as "that Frenchman." Calvin attained recognized status in Geneva only after a long path marked by his personal disinclination to live in such a tumultuous backwater province. It was only an overriding sense of divine calling that changed his intended itinerary toward Strasbourg, a city that had appealed to many in that era as a haven for scholars, not least due to its famous printing houses, libraries, and status as a crossroads of commerce and culture.

Calvin by nature avoided public leadership, certainly of the clerical variety. Although he once set out on what we may call a "pre-theology" track at university, he completed a degree in civil law among Europe's most celebrated scholars of legal theory. Calvin joined the humanist endeavor to retrieve the best of classical wisdom and to articulate ideas intended to transform Christian Europe through the filter of intellectual discussion. This was not strictly a theological movement. Calvin's first publication,

for example, was a commentary on Seneca's ancient treatise concerning mercy, *De clementia*. Already at age twenty-two, Calvin demonstrated the immense learning and humanist mastery of language that he would continue to refine throughout his life. Like many reformers of various stripes in sixteenth-century Europe, Calvin nurtured keen theological interests in a mission that did not necessitate clerical office.

Reformation scholars have emphasized Calvin's unusual trajectory in contrast to Luther's path to ordination and status as a "doctor of the church."⁶ Even more surprising than his lack of

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formal training in theology is the fact that there is no record of any official ordination of Calvin into his famous post in the church of Geneva. Calvin the pastor appears in history with the abruptness of a prophet seeking to be faithful to an unexpected mantle laid upon his shoulders. The Genevan sojourn diverted him from a career in law, or even private erudition. Calvin sacrificed personal preference for the sake of what he took to be God's call (through William Farel, minister of nearby Neuchâtel) for leadership among an unstable evangelical flock. Geneva was no haven. Calvin's vocation included bouts of banishment (including some relatively happy years in Strasbourg, followed by a dutiful return to Geneva when summoned back by the city council), episodes of theological rancor, and xenophobic mobs that raged against him and other foreign refugees. Periodic letters from friends and mentors abroad—notably Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, Philipp Melancthon in Wittenberg, and Heinrich Bullinger in Zürich—encouraged Calvin to stay the course

in the face of strident and sometimes life-threatening opposition. Even five years before his death, he was at best a legal resident (*bourgeois*), as opposed to a native-born Genevan citizen (*citoyen*), who alone had the right to hold political office. Only in his final years, a period in which he was physically devastated by illnesses, did Calvin have any real clout throughout Geneva.

As a humanist, Calvin could be highly persuasive in the realm of ideas, and his works were bestsellers in the relatively new print media of his day. Neither Calvin's nor Luther's persuasiveness relied on theocratic hegemony, but newfound relationships to civil authority heavily influenced respective church identities. Contrary to the popular perception, Calvin was no theocrat, always preferring a tempered civil monarchy to serve as guarantor of federated territories in which churches might flourish. Calvin was suspicious of the urban politics that dominated much of the Swiss Confederation and large swaths of the southern German empire (particularly prior to 1548). It is not insignificant that the various editions of Calvin's magnum opus, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, consistently reprinted a dedicatory plea to the king of France. Such a position lines up closer to Luther's 1520 appeal to Christian princes than to notions of city politics that ruled the day among Swiss evangelicals.

Even beyond the realm of church and state, Calvin had more sympathy for Luther than for Zwingli in most respects. As a young evangelical writing letters at a time when pseudonyms protected against immediate persecution, Calvin occasionally concluded correspondence with the name "Martianus Lucanius," conspicuously featuring the initials M and L. As an academy teacher and pastor of French exiles in Strasbourg, Calvin ascribed to the Wittenberg Concord that sought to forge closer working relationships with Lutheran churches. Also during his Strasbourg sojourn, Calvin recognized Melancthon's modified Augsburg Confession

(the so-called *Confessio augustana variata*) as a positive basis for efforts such as the Regensburg Colloquy of 1541 aimed at staving off schism in western Christendom. Unfortunately, the intra-Lutheran conflicts surrounding Melancthon, particularly following Luther's death, neutralized a great deal of possible ecumenical value inherent in the amity and respect (despite occasional points of disagreement) between Melancthon and Calvin. Calvinists to this day cannot help but recognize a clear line of group demarcation in the solemn pledge by Lutheran ordinands to uphold the "unaltered Augsburg Confession."

Calvin also elaborated a distinctive plan for how the evangelical churches might flourish. The young, optimistic Luther of 1523 had argued in favor of the right of an evangelical parish to elect its own minister but, chastened by peasant uprisings that sometimes claimed to embody his own cause, Luther increasingly relied on a species of princely episcopacy. The Swiss Reformed in the tradition of Zwingli established similar church governance under a magisterial headship. But Calvin helped develop a robust collegial model of church governance by elected elders who retained the final word in decisive matters of church fellowship.⁷ Neither a prince nor a city magistrate could bar access to table fellowship. A degree of independence inherent in Calvinist church discipline enabled Reformed communities to exist even in places of overt persecution all across Europe. Calvinists in hostile regions such as France or the Spanish Netherlands could flourish as churches in ways that were rarer for partisans of the Augsburg Confession, who generally relied on some degree of state sponsorship for their own sense of legitimacy.

Politics and concomitant conflict always imprint group identity. The "I-told-you-so"s of religious wars that went badly—as all religious wars did sooner or later—succeeded in codifying group identities and group blame for subsequent generations. Calvin

may not have been properly Genevan, and Geneva may not have been properly Swiss, but the scenario of partisanship already amounted to an either-or by the time that Calvin emerged as an evangelical leader. Calvin was irreducibly French, for example, and thus generally more supportive of French kings than of imperial Hapsburgs who stood at the head of a political framework for hard-won Lutheran liberties. Calvin's theological compromises with Swiss successors to Zwingli further prompted suspicion and bitter diatribes, as well as self-defensive recriminations.

This is not to suggest that theology was or is an epiphenomenon of social identity. Theological controversies are real and significant in their own right. Intellectual elites debated Christ's presence in the supper and, even more broadly, the salvific nature of participating in Christ could and did animate illiterate peasants. Nevertheless, the historical record bears out a degree of cultural differentiation that hardened theological battle lines. Doctrines associated with election, for example, were not matters that separated church fellowship in Calvin's lifetime. In fact, Calvin, Melancthon, and Luther alike strongly shared the notion that God's will for election was revealed in Christ. Calvin's "double predestination," for instance, was not the logical culmination of a brute fatalist philosophy; he carefully separated providence of the created order (cf. *Institutes* 1.17–18) from election as a participation in Christ's grace (cf. *Institutes* 3.21–24). Calvin occasionally criticized Melancthon—but, out of respect, namelessly—for his reticence in certain circles to expound this difficult aspect of Scripture. Calvin thought that in this matter Melancthon was being squishy with respect to the clarity and authority of Scripture as the preacher's sourcebook. In a not dissimilar move, Luther in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will* excoriated Erasmus for failing to acknowledge humanity's radical fallenness and, therefore, its sole election in Christ apart from

any aspect of works or merit. The theological differences pertaining to predestination would not have separated fellowship among sixteenth-century Lutheran and Reformed churches. Yet by the seventeenth century the various doctrines of election had become confessional shibboleths. It is interesting to speculate how Calvin himself might have reacted to the seventeenth-century Reformed disputes concerning infra- and supralapsarianism, or for that matter, how Luther might have been stunned to hear orthodox Lutheran professors such as J. A. Quenstedt base God's electing will in an abstracted schema of divine foresight of human choice for faith (*fides praevisa*).

In reassessing Calvin's heritage on the eve of the five hundredth anniversary of his birth, my hope is that Lutheran and Reformed Christians may purge some of the vestigial animosities that arose in the course of history. If we better recognize the circumstances of social conflict in the past, we will together be better equipped to meet the need for transformative witness in today's world. Genuine differences must not be ignored or devalued, but an honest look back will allow for a more fruitful future together. LF

JON DELMAS WOOD holds a Ph.D. in church history from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he wrote on Heinrich Bullinger and the Zürich synod. He and his wife, a Presbyterian minister, live in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Notes

1. Heiko A. Oberman, "Europa afflicta: The Reformation of the Refugees," *Archive for Reformation History* 83 (1992): 106.

2. Like most names, even "Reformed" is an imperfect solution, rooted as it is in the polemical assertion that one group versus all others may rightly claim to be "reformed according to God's Word." Lutheranism faces similar challenges to those inherent in the outmoded term "Calvinism." The term "Lutheran" tends overly to link religious identity to Luther's personality in a way that obscures the rich complexity of the Lutheran tradition, not to mention defying the explicit protest by the

young Luther that Christ's name alone be used to denote believers, precisely in contradistinction to the group identified by allegiance to a pope. See *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 60 vols., eds. J. F. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.), 8:685.

3. Among many such examples is the scurrilous little "biography" published by a disgruntled Jerome Bolsec in 1577.

4. One could further note that Calvin's visits to Basel were relatively brief and that Basel itself had only officially joined the Swiss Confederation just over thirty years prior to Calvin's first stay there.

5. The city-state of Geneva retained what had already become a fairly archaic practice of cutting out turf from a disparate swath of military and economic pacts that did not oblige

the city council to any larger political identity. However much Geneva clearly benefitted from association with evangelical governments in the Swiss Confederation, it persisted in precarious independence as its own city-state until the late date of 1815. Geneva also featured significantly different points of view from what was in the sixteenth century a largely Germanic-oriented Swiss Confederation. Geneva had its own bishop, for example, whereas the Zürichers looked north to Constance as the seat of their diocese, in the archbishopric of Mainz. Genevans were not French any more than they were Swiss, but their linguistic and cultural ties were typically oriented westward. This focus intensified as French evangelical refugees swarmed for protection within Genevan walls, just as southern German Protestants flocked

to Zürich, Bern, and Basel in the aftermath of the Schmalkaldic War. The Swiss Protestants were aware of their effective independence and of their nominal association within the political sphere of the German empire (a legal framework that only officially ended in 1648). Although deeply suspicious of the imperial house of Hapsburg, the Swiss for their part mainly spoke German and found themselves in missions and political maneuvers that fixed attention largely north and east.

6. Luther never hesitated to tout his earned doctoral degree in polemics against unschooled Anabaptists or, for that matter, Huldrych Zwingli, a mere "master."

7. For more on this, see the aforementioned article by Heiko A. Oberman, "*Europa afflicta*," 91–111.

MORNINGS LIKE THESE

Travis Scholl

It was the man's habit on mornings
like these, this being the first
day of a new week:
When the rising
slant of light broke
open his eyes, he arose,
stepped through the threshold
out into the morning.

He breathed in the first
full breath of open air.
He remembered
the goodness of creation.
He kneeled to tend
the unkempt garden at his feet:

kneading soil, his fingers
breaking up hard clods, he is
making earth fertile again.
It was no surprise then
when Magdala saw him
pulling weeds
that she thought he was the gardener.

TRAVIS SCHOLL is Managing Editor of Theological Publications at Concordia Seminary—St. Louis.