

**REDISCOVERING CALVIN:  
Prescription for What Ails Us?  
by Peter Wyatt**

Some years ago Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore named four crucial factors inhibiting the mission of the church today. Their influence continues: contemporary individualism, pervasive secularism (including the self-secularization of the church), the corrosive influence of imperial uses of power, and the lack of compelling theological vision.<sup>1</sup> This last Migliore rates as the most important. In the case of the United Church, with its characteristically pragmatic and activist approach to ministry and mission, this lack is especially notable. Without theological vision the church lacks masts on which to hoist sails to catch the winds of God.

This year, the quincentenary of the birth of John Calvin, provides opportunity to ponder the relevance of his thought for the theological vocation of the United Church. Might we find in his theology resources for the development of a more compelling theological vision?

In naming Calvin, of course, one is immediately confronted by the negative images carried in popular culture. Wasn't Calvin the one who taught double predestination, brought about the execution of Servetus, and promoted a repressive spirituality as the theocrat of Geneva? In "The Incarnate One," Scots poet Alexander Muir assigns blame for the perceived gloom of his native land: "The Word made flesh has here become word again/ A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook./ See there King Calvin with his iron pen/ And God three angry letters in a book . . ."

It is true that in unstinting service of goals that he believed were God's goals, Calvin could be intransigent and even vindictive.<sup>2</sup> Not all negative conceptions of him are unwarranted! Yet it is saddening that, through limited exposure to Calvin's work and the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Migliore, "The Missionary God and the Missionary Church," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 1, p. 15f.

proliferation of misconceptions, Calvin and Calvinism usually function as synonyms for repressive religion. There is too much on the credit side of the ledger for us in the United Church to allow stereotypes to banish Calvin from our inheritance. In the brief space permitted by these pages, I hope to present something of Calvin's positive legacy in relation to challenges facing us today.

### **The Nature of Theological Vision**

One of the stereotypes of Calvin's thought is that it is an arid intellectual system. This image unfortunately plays well in the pragmatic ethos of our church, an ethos in which theology frequently is seen as an intellectual diversion. Calvin's single most important work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is indeed an intellectual achievement and is to be valued as a coherent expression of the full scope of Christian belief. Yet we should not fail to note that in the preface to this "systematic" *magnum opus* the author states his purpose as a modest one, that of assisting readers in knowing what to seek in Holy Scripture. In the spirit of the great medievals who understood theology to be *sacra pagina* (the "sacred page"), Calvin regarded theology as exposition of the meaning of Scripture.

It is a privilege of faith that through the testimony of Scripture and the ministry of the Holy Spirit we have real knowledge of God and of the meaning of creaturely existence. If there is mystery at the heart of this knowledge, it derives not so much from all that we do not know as it does from the unfathomable depth of what we do know. Humans could not know God at all, of course, if it were a matter of our natural capacity to comprehend the Maker of heaven and earth. But God stoops low, "accommodating himself" to our capacity. The Bible is replete with examples of this accommodation

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<sup>2</sup> William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, e.g., documents Calvin's callous treatment of fellow ministers who chose to remain in the service of the Genevan state after his dismissal in 1538. This treatment occurred following Calvin's return to Geneva in 1541. However, Naphy also points out that these ministers lacked the competence of their successors, who, like Calvin, were well-educated, French and very able.

through analogy and metaphor, but this accommodation is unsurpassingly expressed in the incarnation of the eternal Word. The Infinite becomes finite as Christ approaches us in our own nature, “lest our minds be overwhelmed with the immensity of his glory”.<sup>3</sup>

For Calvin, knowledge of God is always relational. To draw nearer to the Creator of heaven and earth is not an armchair exercise. God can never be an object of our investigation, adjudicated by humanly devised standards. To “know” the living God involves one in “existential apprehension” (McNeill), being grasped in the act of knowing so that our being and self-knowledge are unavoidably transformed. Knowing God is the cognitive aspect of the experience of faith and breathes the air of awe and gratitude. In Calvin’s view, the knowledge of God is always “cordial” (of the heart), and is an exercise of piety.

As the originating discipline of the university culture of the West, the study of theology takes its rightful place in the academy. However, this scholarly locus should not obscure the fact that the acquiring of theological vision belongs to the life of faith. Theology, as the exposition of cordial knowledge, feeds intellectual hunger for God. Moreover, the acquiring and refining of theological vision is at the service of God who calls into existence, and is known in, the community of faith.

### **The Reappearance of Speculative Theology and the Witness of Scripture**

Toronto philosophy professor Mark Kingwell has pointed out the vital distinction between the novel and the new. The novel is actually something familiar dressed up to look different (“new and improved”), thus conveying a sense of familiarity and comfort. The genuinely new, on the other hand, is usually baffling. For some years now, the images of thinking outside the box, colouring outside the lines and pushing the envelope have proliferated and been uncritically received. One result is that we are especially vulnerable

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<sup>3</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster, 1960) II.vi.4.

to confusing the merely novel with the new. This is evident in the popularity of such novelties as old paganism paraded as new possibility (Harpur's *Pagan Christ*) and deistic rationalism promoted as the future of the church (Spong, Vosper). In both cases we have "progressive" church members hailing the return of a speculative approach in theology.

In such a context Calvin's insistence on the authoritative role of Holy Scripture in theology appears as either maddeningly reactionary or refreshingly counter-cultural. Given the majesty of God, and the twin limitations of human finitude and sin, he maintained that true knowledge of God can only arise from God's self-revelation. It is to this self-revelation of God that the Bible is witness. The Reformed tradition has received from Calvin "the Scripture principle" according to which the church's teaching and life continually are to be tested by the witness of Scripture, so that the church may always be in the process of reformation (*ecclesia reformata et reformanda*). However, the notion of a Scripture *principle* should not lead us to think that Calvin treated the Bible in an ideological way. The opposite is true.

As a renaissance scholar, Calvin brought considerable skill and insight to his understanding of Scripture. He was among the first to approach the sacred text from an historical-critical perspective. Against the medieval "default" tendency to find the meaning of the Old Testament chiefly in allegory, he insisted on the "literal" meaning of the text, i.e., the meaning intended by the author in his historical context. For instance, in interpreting Old Testament texts he resisted going immediately to a forward reference to Christ when there was an evident immediate historical reference at hand.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time as he brought critical discrimination to sacred texts, he also held those texts to constitute divinely inspired testimony to God's self-revelation. Given the stereotypes of Calvin's thought, it may come as surprise that he understood this self-

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin rejects the common notion that Ps. 45 is typological of Christ, maintaining that it is an ode in celebration of Solomon's marriage to a daughter of the Pharaoh.

revelation to be found first of all in the works of creation. Calvin's awe for the creation is evident in his conviction that these works function as "a dazzling theatre of the divine glory", and as "the garment in which God, as it were, clothes himself". While sin has altered dramatically the human ability to recognize the original revelation of God's existence and perfections, it still shines in objective splendour. Yet, given the vitiation of our spiritual sight, the "spectacles" of Scripture now are required to correct our vision. To take stock of the significance of this metaphor, the pithy comment of Donald Mathers is apt: "The Bible is for looking through, not at." Even with the corrective lenses of Scripture, the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit in regenerate hearts is required to enable believers to recognize the revelatory power of the majestic universe.

In sum, Calvin's view of Scripture allows it to possess bedrock authority without turning it into a quarry of ideological propositions.

### **Public Witness and the Justice of God**

In some churches they say you can assess orthodoxy by the number of times the speaker uses the name of Jesus. In the United Church it may well be the number of times we name "justice". Today, "justice" has become a shibboleth and some even wonder whether justice has replaced Jesus in our public testimony.

Where our forbears spoke of the righteousness of God and so translated Scripture, we today speak of God's justice. Either way, the Biblical concepts of *tzedec* (Old Testament, Hebrew) and *dikaiousune* (New Testament, Greek) point to something indispensable in our understanding of the character and will of God. Righteousness/justice is both exemplified, and commanded, by God. Vital Scriptural faith cannot exist without obedience to the God who is perfectly just and who requires just behaviour from, and among, the people of God. The challenge today is that our use of the concept of justice often seems to have been cut loose from its Scriptural moorings, defined more by Enlightenment standards of natural justice or contemporary notions of human rights than by the biblical witness to our accountability before God. The mere assertion, "It's a justice issue", doesn't make it one.

Western culture being what it is, many of our secular standards are deeply rooted in biblical narrative and law. Yet our task in the church is not to accept contemporary social standards as givens, but to bring critical perspective to them, assessing whether and how they reflect grounding in the character and will of God. In exercising its prophetic calling, the church always has to maintain a counter-cultural, if sympathetic, stance with regard to the surrounding social context. As a Cuban Christian once said in response to a question about the church's witness in Castro's Cuba, "We are friendly critics."

Calvin certainly is a source of strong teaching on just social relations and also lived his teaching in appearances before the Genevan state council on behalf of refugees and the poor. Characteristic of his teaching about the Christian life is that sanctification reaches beyond the regeneration of individuals to their empowerment for responsible action in the world.<sup>5</sup> To employ H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of the relationship between Christ and culture, Calvin represents the type of "Christ the transformer of culture". In this regard, his understanding of the *imago dei* is notable. Since all individual humans bear the image of God, we are bound, as by a "sacred cord", to offer one another "mutual assistance and aid". The *imago* is at once an assertion of individual dignity *and* a social imperative.

Calvin insisted that it is the responsibility of government to take special care for society's most vulnerable. It is God's will that sovereigns should care for the poor, as did King David, with humanity and mercy. Yet these qualities are "too seldom found in sovereigns, who, dazzled by their own splendour, withdraw themselves at a distance from the poor and the afflicted, as if it were unworthy of, and far beneath their royal dignity, to make them objects of their care."<sup>6</sup> Calvin maintained that the chief goal of self-denial in the Christian life is to free up resources to be given to the poor. "We are taught that all the gifts we possess have been

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Link, "Calvin between Humanism and Discipleship," *Reformed World* (57.4) p. 261.

<sup>6</sup> *Commentary on the Psalms* 72.12.

bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our neighbours' benefit."<sup>7</sup>

What distinguishes Calvin's teaching is that Christian social responsibility is seen to flow from our relationship with God. Recognizing this flow and the rootedness of justice in God's own being and command is important in learning to speak more holistically in our public utterance.

### **Saving Faith and Active Discipleship – Together Again?**

The recognition of the root of justice in God is important also because justice is not the only divine perfection. Calvin reminds us that among the perfections of God are eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth and mercy.<sup>8</sup> In particular, much hinges on the radical connection between divine justice and divine mercy. In the face of humanity's proclivity to sin and injustice, God's defining and sublime act of justice is to freely justify sinners. This is the making righteous of the undeserving through mercy and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. To this offer we are invited to respond in trusting faith.

The integral relationship between divine justice and mercy is illumined further by Calvin's assertion of profound balance between justification (being declared just out of God's free mercy) and sanctification (being fitted for holy living). There is little doubt that Calvin, along with other reformers, emphasized the mediatorial ministry of Jesus as Saviour, a ministry that results in the justification of the ungodly. What may not be so well known is the equal emphasis he gave to the living of the Christian life in conformity with Christ.

It is an arresting note that, in the ordering of the *Institutes*, Calvin places his discussion of sanctification *before* that of justification. No doubt he was answering Roman Catholic criticism that the doctrine of free justification left believers without any motivation to act for good in the world. In treating sanctification before justification, Calvin was underscoring the Scriptural principle that the *imputed* righteousness of justification by grace is

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<sup>7</sup> *Institutes* III.vii.5.

<sup>8</sup> *Commentary on Romans* 1.21.

always coupled with an *imparted*, actual righteousness of life. In following Paul at Romans 6.1, he avers: “Those who imagine that Christ bestows free justification upon us without imparting newness of life shamefully rend Christ asunder.”<sup>9</sup>

There was a time in the United Church when, with a certain pride, we promoted a healthy balance between communicating faith in God’s saving grace and encouraging action in service of God’s coming reign. We had a phrase for it and a national board charged with stewardship of the balance – “Evangelism and Social Service”. Today we have social justice, the obvious successor to one of the two components of the former balance. Something clearly is missing when the call to social justice leaves so little room for the call to faith in God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. Should our public witness not attest God’s mercy as well as God’s justice? Should it not name Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, fount of God’s mercy and path of God’s justice? Calvin’s strong teaching about the inseparable partnership of saving faith and active discipleship is an illumining beacon.

### **Christ and Creation**

Characteristic of Calvin’s teaching is the attention he gives to the role of Christ in both redemption *and* creation. He repeatedly draws attention to this double role, the first as eternal Word through whom God creates and sustains all things, and the second as incarnate Mediator through whom God redeems and perfects them. Calvin lifts up the classic loci of John 1, Col.1 and Heb.1 to illustrate the first role of Christ as the One “through whom and for whom” all things were created. This “high” christology is really a holistic one, for Christ is thus *ikon* of God as Redeemer and also God as Creator. “For Christ is that image in which God presents to our view not only his heart, but also his hands and feet. I give the name of his *heart* to that secret love with which he embraces us in Christ; by his *hands* and *feet* I understand those works of his which are displayed before our eyes.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Commentary on Romans* 6.1.

<sup>10</sup> Preface to Genesis in *Commentary on the Five Books of Moses* (Eerdmans) p. 64.

The most recent articulation of the ecumenical vision of the United Church is found in “Mending the World”, a report endorsed by the 1997 General Council as a “lens for interpreting the work of the church”. Its passion to serve God’s world-mending work through greater ecological responsibility and in collaboration with people of other faiths and ideologies may be well known. Perhaps not so well known is one of its key theological assertions, namely, that Christ is representative not only of God and of humanity, but also of all creation. This is the “cosmic Christ”, the Christ “through whom all things came into being”(John 1.3). Greater attention to this christological focus can only enhance our resolve to serve the creation as a better friend. We will be enabled to relate environmental concerns to the core of our faith, God creatively and redemptively known in Jesus Christ.

### **Is the Church Dispensable?**

One of the serious challenges we face lies in the institutional life of the church. We are afflicted with too many meetings that drain rather than renew our energies. Attempts to exercise discipline are fraught with potential for civil litigation. Our understanding of ordered and other ministries seems in constant flux. In a complex conciliar system with competing interest groups, authority appears so dispersed that clarifying and decisive action rarely can be taken.

One factor generating such symptoms is a steep deficit in our ecclesiology. As a pragmatic church, we are action-oriented, usually rolling up our sleeves in the face of a challenge. We also can so emphasize mission that little attention is paid to the nature and purpose of the church. One even gets the impression that the church might be dispensable in the purposes of God. If we do celebrate life in the church, it usually is the community of human belonging that we exalt. What frequently goes missing in action is reflection on the nature of the church as divinely instituted and as God’s preferred instrument of mission.

The United Church does have an ecclesiology. It can be found in brief form in the Basis of Union and in subsequent statements of

faith. Moreover, unless we restrict our church's story to the years after 1925, it can also be found in the writings of Calvin and Wesley, progenitors of movements that in time were to lead to the formation of The United Church of Canada. Both Calvin and Wesley understood their vocation primarily as reformers of the church and they were anything but toadies to establishment structures. Yet along with their restlessness for reform they brought passionate reverence for the church and its ordered ministry, regarding them as divinely established and guided. As Calvin writes: "For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast . . ." <sup>11</sup>

Crucial to Calvin's conception of a church both reformed and also always being reformed is the headship of Christ. His main criticism of the papal church was its usurpation of Christ's proper role in faith and rule in the church. In offering prayers to saints to intercede with God, in the indulgent lifestyle of princely bishops and in presuming to offer a repeated sacrifice in the mass, the papal church was displacing Christ from his place as sole mediator and sole head of the church. Yet Calvin cherished no illusions about the sanctity of the reformed church in Geneva. In a winsome image he attributed the holiness of the church to Christ's ongoing "domestic" presence: "The Lord is daily at work, smoothing our wrinkles and cleansing spots . . . The church is holy, then, in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect." <sup>12</sup>

It is observed that the proper way to put things is not "The church has a mission", but "The mission has a church." Ruth Duck expresses it well: "The church is meant for mission as a fire is meant for burning." But the church is also meant for worship and nurture and community. To be sure, the missional calling of the church needs to be lifted up today, but not to the detriment of the church's divine institution and the dignity of its ordered and other ministries. It is vital that the mission indeed has a church.

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<sup>11</sup> *Institutes* IV.i.4.

<sup>12</sup> *Institutes* IV.i.17.