

The Five Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of John Calvin
The Two Hundredth Anniversary of Charles Darwin
2009

Two thousand and nine marks the anniversary of two markedly contrasting individuals. It is the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. It is also the 450th anniversary of the completion of the final edition of Calvin's Institutes in 1559. It can be argued that the influence of the former has been largely negative whilst that of the later has been positive bringing massive benefits to the lives of men and women. The former has received a large degree of attention in the media, not to mention the issuing commemorative stamps, the minting of commemorative coins, publishing of books and magazine articles in his honour. The later has of course been honoured but has received by no means the degree of recognition he deserves.

It is the purpose of this article to reflect on John Calvin's legacy but first a brief reference to Darwin's legacy. It is claimed that evolutionary theory has had widespread benefits in the development of medications, the mapping of human genomes, as well as in the improvement of food production and sanitation methods. This however is very much open to question. Space does not permit more the following comment from the eminent scientist Philip S. Skell, a member of the National Academy of Science.

I recently asked more than seventy eminent researchers if they would have done their work differently if they had thought Darwin's theory was wrong. The responses were all the same: No. I also examined the outstanding discoveries of the past century: the discovery of the double helix; the characterization of the ribosome; the mapping of the genomes; research on medications and drug reactions; improvements in food production and sanitation; the development of new surgeries; and others. I even queried biologists working in areas where one would expect the Darwinian paradigm to have the most benefited research, such as the emergence of resistance to antibiotics and pesticides. Here, as elsewhere, I found that Darwin's theory had provided no discernable guidance, but was brought in, after the breakthroughs, as an interesting narrative gloss.

The Scientist Aug. 2005

What is undoubtedly clear is that the theory has had many harmful results especially in the area of morality. It has provided a way for man to evade his responsibility to God. If everything in existence has developed without God, then there is no one to whom man is ultimately answerable. There is no absolute truth, nor ultimate justice. Darwinians believe that man is answerable only to himself and that which helps the process of evolution helps society. Hitler used Darwin's theory to rationalise his hatred of the Jews and others. Sir Arthur Keith, an evolutionist himself, expresses the point succinctly.

Hitler is an uncompromising evolutionist and we must seek for an evolutionary explanation if we are to understand his actions.

Or to quote Hitler's own words:

The state has the responsibility of deciding as unfit for reproductive purposes anyone who is obviously ill or genetically unsound and must carry through with this responsibility ruthlessly without respect to understanding or lack of understanding on the part of anyone.

Creation Verses Evolution Handbook p.100

In 1961 Julian Huxley grandson of the well known Victorian evolutionist Thomas Huxley and still propagating the evolutionist message, wrote of the future:

It must be focused on man it must be organised around the facts and ideas of evolution. It will have nothing to do with absolutes, including, absolute truth, absolute morality, absolute perfection or absolute authority.

The Great Evolution Debate p. 166

Huxley together with most evolutionists believed that man will by his own wit and wisdom progress higher and higher. Huxley died in 1975 but signs of human moral progress are still few and far between.

C.S Lewis regarded the theory of evolution to be a myth. He said that long after the theory has been abandoned by cultured circles it will still for a long time retain its hold on the masses. He gave several reasons for this e.g.

1. The basic idea of the myth is that small or chaotic things perpetually turn themselves to large, strong and ordered things. In the popular mind this is seen everywhere. Acorns become great oaks, grubs become insects, eggs become birds. Even basic machines become more complex machines as time goes by. However these instances are not real examples of evolution at all. The thought that piles of rubbish will one day inevitably turn into houses is a cheerful thought but it is not supported by the facts of life in this world.
2. A second reason why evolution holds its place in the popular imagination is that it satisfies two opposite tendencies of the mind. That is the tendency to denigration and the tendency to flattery. In the myth everything is becoming everything else: in fact everything is everything else at an earlier or later stage of development-the later stages being always the better. This means that if you are feeling like Mencken (H.L. Mencken, "*Men will always try to make virtues of their weaknesses*") you can debunk all the respectable things by pointing out that they are merely elaborations of the disreputable things. Love is merely an elaboration of lust, virtue is merely an elaboration of instinct, and so forth. On the one hand it also means that if you are feeling what the people call idealistic you can regard all the nasty things (in your self or your party or your nation) as being merely the undeveloped forms of all the nice things: vice is only undeveloped virtue, egotism is only undeveloped altruism, a little more education will set everything right.
3. The myth also pleases those who want to sell things. In the old days, a man had a family carriage built for him when he got married and expected it to last all his life. Such a frame of mind would hardly suit modern manufacturers. But popular evolutionism suits them exactly. Nothing ought to last. They want you to have a new car, a new radio set, a new everything every year, for

this is evolution, this is development this is the way the universe itself is going.

4. The myth also tends to change our attitude and diminish our respect for our parents and our elders. We are led to think about parents not as our teachers or those who have nurtured us and loved us but as those from whom we have evolved. We have superseded them and we can disregard their wisdom because we have moved beyond it, we are leaving them behind.
5. Finally, modern politics would be impossible without the myth. Modern politicians want us to believe that any given change in society is most likely to be for the best. What is never admitted is that many changes in society destroy our liberties and very often are no improvement on and indeed are worse than what has gone before.

Condensed from, The Funeral of a Great Myth C.S. Lewis

The Lasting Legacy of John Calvin

John Calvin was born just outside Noyon, France on 10th July 1509. It is no exaggeration to point out that his influence on history is so great that you cannot begin to understand the history of the United Kingdom, Europe, the U.S.A or any English speaking nation without reference to John Calvin. There is no part of The Western World where his influence has not reached, and there are few parts of the modern world on which his teaching, (though perhaps not recognised as its author), has not permeated.

James Packer has remarked that:

For a century and more after his death John Calvin was literally the world's most influential man, in the sense that his ideas made more history than did the thoughts, or actions, of anyone else who was alive at that time.

We may also add the following unintended tribute to Calvin, from the Roman Catholic periodical, *The Tablet*:

It cannot be denied that Calvin was the greatest man of the Protestant rebellion (we would say Reformation). But for him Luther's movements would probably have died out with him and his associates. Calvin organised it, gave it form and consistency, and his spirit has sustained it to this day. If Luther preceded him, it is still by his name, rather than Luther's, that the rebellion should be called; and the only form of Protestantism that still shows any sign of life is unquestionably Calvinism. It is Calvinism that sustains Methodism, that gives what little it has to Lutheranism, and that prevents a very general return of the Anglicans to the bosom of the Church.

The Tablet, January 1877

Calvin's Teaching

Calvin's Teaching on the Sovereignty of God

In contrast to Darwin's emphasis on the pre-eminence of man, Calvin laid emphasis on the Sovereignty of God. Man's chief end and happiness was not to be found in the autonomy of man or in any man centred pursuit, pleasure or philosophy.

We can safely say without any fear of challenge or contradiction, that the great fundamental thought and heart of Calvin's life is the doctrine of God. God is at the centre of Calvin's thought. The Calvinist does not start out with some interest of man, for example, his conversion or his justification, vitally important though these are. The Calvinist places always in the foreground the thought of God. The absolute sovereignty of God and life lived to the glory of God are the fundamental principles of Calvinism.

Speaking of the sovereignty of God B.B. Warfield says,

The Calvinist is the man who sees God behind all phenomena and in all that occurs recognizes the hand of God, working out his will; who makes the attitude of the soul to God in prayer its permanent attitude in all its life – activities; and who casts himself on the grace of God alone, excluding every trace of dependence on self from the whole work of his salvation.

Quoted in: The Basic Ideas of Calvinism, H. Henry Meeter p. 19

Calvin emphasized God the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all things and the Governor of all things. This enables us to affirm the purposefulness of all things and that there is absolute truth and absolute justice.

As H. Henry Meeter puts it:

To be irreligious is to forsake the highest aim of our existence, and on the other hand to covet no other existence than for the sake of God, to long for nothing but for the will of God, and to be wholly absorbed in the glory of the name of the Lord, such is the pith and kernel of all true religion. "Hallowed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done," is the threefold petition which gives utterance to all true religion.

Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper p.53

Calvin's Teaching on the Providence of God

From the emphasis on the Sovereignty of God in Calvin we may go on to speak of the providence of God. Belief that all things are under the control of a good and wise God and that all things work together for good to them that love him creates a tremendous impetus toward a life that is noble good and self sacrificing. The evolutionist Thomas Huxley challenged this, writing:

The release of God from the anthropomorphic disguise of personality also produces release from another vice which we may term Providentialism. God provides for the sparrow, we are told; how much more for man? And so this beneficent Power will always provide. Divine Providence is an excuse for the poor whom we will have always with us; for the human improvidence which produces whole broods of children without reflection or care as to how they shall live; for not taking action when we are lazy; or, more rarely, for justifying the action we do take when we are energetic. From the point of view of the future destiny of man the present is a time of clash between the idea of Providentialism and the idea of Humanism- human control

by human effort in accordance with human ideals. If Providentialism wins, even if it wins only in the dominance of the soul and the religious life, humanity is doomed to stagnation, or to destruction.

Religion Without Revelation, p. 18

If Huxley is correct it is reasonable to expect it to be born out and confirmed by the history of Calvinism. The question is does that story bear out the thesis that faith in God's providence paralyzes man's vital energies in seeking that which is good, or Marx's theory that *religion is the opiate of the people*. It is manifestly clear that it does not. We may use as an illustration the great Calvin Memorial in Geneva. The idea of that monument is that out of the faith of Calvin were born all the free governments of the modern world. Right and left the figure of John Calvin are the figures of William the Silent of Holland, Coligne of France, John Knox of Scotland a Pilgrim Father of New England and Oliver Cromwell, Calvinists all.

When we think of such men we do not think of pietistic acquiescence, or of their faith as *an opiate of the people*, we think of firm endurance on the very edge of despair against overwhelming odds and of their Herculean activity for the City of God.

So far is Calvinism from producing slackness of will and febleness of character that Calvinists have been the most strenuous of men. The true Calvinist feels himself to be an instrument of the Divine Will and bends to whatever toil he undertakes in the unshakable conviction that he is on the side of God. How copious a spring of moral energy lies in this thought I need not tell you. Calvinism was the form of faith in the strength of which the Dutch Republic was sustained, and the American Republic founded, to propagate which Tyndale gave the English people the Bible in their own tongue and with it his life; which formed the Royal intellect of Cromwell and inspired the majestic verse of Milton.

Beard's Hibbert Lectures on The Reformation pp. 257 and 261

Calvin's Teaching on Man's Lostness and Salvability

Calvinism offers a most penetrating and far reaching analysis of man's condition, emphasising man's fallenness and bondage to sin and his salvability, through the merits and mercies of Christ. Calvin along with the other Reformers stressed the Biblical teaching on the fact that man could be saved by the grace of God in Christ. Arguably more than any of the Reformers he demonstrated that salvation is wholly by the free and unmerited mercy and grace of God in Christ.

Calvin said, *'we shall never be clearly convinced... that our salvation flows from the fountain of God's free mercy till we are acquainted with his eternal election, which illustrates the grace of God by this comparison, that he adopts not all promiscuously to the hope of salvation but gives to some what he refuses to others.'*

'One of the central functions of the doctrine is to emphasize the graciousness of God. For Luther, God's graciousness is reflected in the fact that he justifies sinners, men

*and women who are totally unworthy of such a privilege. For Calvin, God's graciousness is demonstrated in his decision to redeem individuals irrespective of their merits: the decision to redeem an individual is made without reference to how worthy that individual might be. For Luther God's graciousness is demonstrated in that he saves sinners despite their demerits. For Calvin, that graciousness is demonstrated in that he saves individuals **irrespective** of their merits. Although Luther and Calvin defend the graciousness of God in somewhat different manners, the same principle is affirmed by their respective views on justification and predestination'.*

Reformation Thought A. E. McGrath p. 125

It is sometimes forgotten that the teaching of Calvin and the other Reformers that Scripture reveals that Christ has irrespective of anything in man fulfilled the demands of the Law on His people's behalf. That it is to Him that we must look for salvation and not within ourselves. This was a truth not only of unspeakable benefit to the individual soul it also brought with it wide sociological implications.

Once the subjectivism of the medieval church was eliminated in Protestant countries, the energy consumed by desperately seeking and 'earning' salvation was turned outward, and a thousand years of intellectual, political, social and economic, and religious stagnation ended.

Civilization and the Protestant Reformation John W. Robbins p.4

Calvin's Teaching on Christ as the One Mediator between God and Man

Calvin taught that all true believers have direct access to God through Christ alone, without the need for other mediators such as priests or any other so called dispenser of sacred mysteries.

This teaching also has personal and far reaching benefits within society.

One of the effects of true religion is to make man free: free that is to express that general religious impression stamped, by God Himself upon our unconscious nature. Free to be the people God intended us to be.

On the other hand, every appearance of an interposing priest or enchanter in the domain of religion fetters the human spirit, in a chain which presses the more woefully the more the piety increases in fervour. In the Church of Rome, even at the present day the best Catholics are most closely confined in the fetters of the clerics.....

Only he who personally stands before God on his own account, and enjoys an uninterrupted communion with God, can properly display the glorious wings of liberty. And both in Holland and in France, in England as well as in America, the historic result affords the most undeniable evidence of the fact that despotism has found no more invincible antagonists, and liberty of conscience no braver, no more resolute champions than the followers of Calvin.

Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper p.57

Calvin's Teaching on Scripture

Calvin stressed the importance of God's Revelation. One might say the whole of his life was dedicated to the setting forth of God's Word. He wrote tracts he wrote his masterpiece *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he wrote commentaries on all of the Books of the New Testament and on the Old Testament on all Five Books of Moses, plus Joshua, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel and the Minor Prophets. Calvin it has been said assumed that the whole of his theological labour was the exposition of Scripture. Between 1536 and 1574 he preached around 4,000 sermons.

A vital and fundamental emphasis of Calvinism is on the absolute necessity of a Revelation from heaven and the supreme authority of Holy Scripture. To undermine the authority of Scripture is to destroy Christianity itself.

Calvin held to the absolute inspiration to the Word, and the grand unity resulting therefrom. 'The principle which distinguishes our religion from all others', he said (and modern Protestants should listen attentively to his words) 'is the knowledge we possess that God has spoken to us.

Let Christ Be Magnified J.H. Merle d'Aubigne p.14

Calvin like Luther before him believed that the Word of God worked powerfully but secretly in men's hearts, bringing repentance, faith and new life. The preacher can get to the ears of his listeners but not to their hearts. It is God alone that speaks to the conscience and moves the innermost will. The preacher preaches the Word but must leave the result to God. In defining the conscience as belonging to God's dominion Calvin and the Reformers established the right of liberty of conscience and protected conscience from the power of the state.

Calvin's Teaching on the Concept of the Callings

True religion involves the whole of our lives. Every aspect of it is to be dedicated to God. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, not only with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength, but also with all thy mind.

Calvin emphasized the fact that we use our mind in religion and not only our feelings or our will. He thus opened up the fact that our religious life is not to be excluded from the realm of science or art or literature or commerce or any legitimate area of public life and service.

A religion confined to the closet, the cell, or the church, therefore, Calvin abhors. With the Psalmist, he calls upon heaven and earth; he calls upon all peoples and nations to give glory to God. God is present in all life, with the influence of His omnipresent and almighty power, and no sphere of human life is conceivable in which religion does not maintain its demands that God shall be praised, that God's ordinances shall be observed and that all our lives shall be permeated with fervent and ceaseless prayer. Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he

may apply his hand, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind in the world of art, and science, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of his God, he is employed in the service of his God, he has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of God, - consequently, it is impossible for Calvinists to confine religion to a single group, or to some circles among men. Religion concerns the whole of our human race.

The Basic Ideas of Calvinism, H. Henry Meeter p. 63

For the Calvinist true religion has to do with every aspect of life, all legitimate work can be done to the praise of God and all life is to be lived to His glory.

The successors of Calvin the Puritans went on to build on these principles and laid the foundations of many of the liberties we now enjoy, that is freedom of speech, press, and religion, the independence of juries, and the right of *habeas corpus*, that right not to be imprisoned without cause.

In 1908 Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in it he virtually accredited Calvin as the originator of the capitalist system. This theory is largely rejected today but it is true that Calvin did inculcate the virtues of hard work, honesty, frugality, thrift and punctuality which lead to the development of capitalism. These virtues did lead eventually to the ending of serfdom and the establishment of a free political and economic order and one might add in Calvin's vision a system of economics with a human face which emphasized the responsibility of the rich to be mindful of the needs of the deserving poor.

Calvin has left a massive legacy to the western world, though few today seem to be aware of it. David Hill in a recent work on Calvin lists 10 areas on which this outstanding Christian man has made a lasting impact.

1. He was one of the forerunners of modern public education. He was the only Reformer to found a university that would last for centuries i.e. The Academy of Geneva.
2. He contended for the freedom of the church from state interference.
3. He opposed the idea of totalitarian government, arguing that the powers of government should be limited.
4. He began a system of social welfare which provided for the needs of the deserving poor.
5. He maintained that the 10 Commandments were the foundation of public morality.
6. He established in Geneva one of the earliest forms of democratic society.
7. He believed that one could serve God in every legitimate area of life. He dignified work and said that whether we eat or drink we are to do all to the glory of God.

8. He encouraged enterprise in business, but warned against the danger of riches and mere materialism. He warned against the squandering of money and said that all work should be done without fraud or deception.

9. He introduced congregational singing into public worship.

10. He encouraged the printing of Christian literature and the widespread reading of good Christian books.

I hope that this brief summary of a mass of information has thrown some light on the rich legacy of John Calvin; if we want to see more of the secular and destructive legacy of Charles Darwin all we need to do is to look around us at its devastating social and moral effects.

Roland Burrows