

Glorious Grace

Psalm 24 & Ephesians 1: 3-14

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 12th July 2009

I just returned yesterday evening from a conference at Montreat Conference Center, outside Asheville, NC, to celebrate the legacy of John Calvin on the 500th anniversary of his birth, 10th July 1509, in Noyon, France (northeast of Paris). The conference was billed as the *Calvin Jubilee*. As many have said to me, the thought of a Calvin Jubilee sounds like an oxymoron. It's only an oxymoron, however, if one buys into the stereotypes we have of the man. He's been much maligned over the years. If we did a word-association test with Calvin, the following words would probably come to mind: killjoy, sourpuss, a dour and vengeful sort, a sadist, misogynist, a narrow-minded prig, a prudish moralist, a tyrant, a religious fanatic, a cold, melancholic, even phlegmatic soul, "a steely spinner of harsh theological doctrines about a depraved humanity and a fierce God predestining people to heaven or hell." He was certainly despised by some in his Geneva; some even named their dogs after him.

As the spiritual founder of the Reformed theological tradition, a leading theologian of the church, along with Augustine (354-430), Aquinas (c.1225-1274), and Barth (1886-1968), Calvin deserves a little more respect. Actually, we need to completely rehabilitate him, reclaim him in the church. It's difficult to celebrate the man because he left us very little account of his personal life experience. He didn't like to talk about himself and would not relish the attention given to him. He requested at his death that he be buried in an unmarked grave in Geneva. He didn't want a shrine erected over his grave, neither did he want his bones to become holy relics for adoration.

People can say what they will about Calvin, and have, but as Peter Steinfelds wrote in *The New York Times* last Saturday, Calvin was "a religious thinker and leader who may have done as much as anyone to shape the modern world."¹ He's often associated with predestination and usually quickly dismissed because of what we think he said about predestination, usually confusing predestination with predeterminism – and they are not the same. Calvin was not an advocate of predeterminism. He was an advocate of predestination – or what theologians call the doctrine of election.

The contemporary novelist, Marilynne Robinson, author of the Pulitzer-prize winning, *Gilead* (one of my favorite novels), is a huge fan of Calvin. She's a deacon in

¹ Peter Steinfelds, *The New York Times*, July 4, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/04/us/04beliefs.html>.

her church in Iowa and has been reading Calvin for years, for fun. She also reads Calvin in order to make her life better, and therefore commends him to the church. She claims that reading Calvin's beautiful French prose has made her a better writer, but more than anything, in reading Calvin, (his sermons, his commentaries on scripture, in masterful *Institutes*) she has come to see the glory and wonder and amazement of God pouring through his writings. When Calvin wrote about theology, about God, he was not interested in rational speculative considerations of the divine, which, as he put it, "Flits about in the brain doing nothing."²

The doctrine that consumed Calvin, and you can see it in the first ten pages of the *Institutes*, was a Christian doctrine of creation. What I mean by this is not creationism, although Calvin believed in a literal reading of Genesis, but a view of the glory of God found in the created order, and to the eyes of faith, gives profound witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. "There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice," and that therefore we are "not only to be spectators in this beautiful theatre but to enjoy the vast bounty and variety of good things which are displayed to us in it."³ Calvin approaches this amazing world, the "theatre of God's glory," with awe, amazement, or as he put it, "wonderment." God rules over the creation as sovereign. Our lives are held in the sovereignty of God. Calvin is so overwhelmed by the beauty of creation, but also the beauty (yes, *beauty*) of God who has called, claimed, loved, and redeemed us in Jesus Christ, and so calls us to serve this God in the theatre of God's glory, the world. Robinson, along with historians remind us that "Calvin was a product of Renaissance humanism, a student of Greek and Roman classics who reread Cicero [106 BC-43 BC] every year, a writer of exceptional grace and lucidity in both Latin and French, a man of prodigious learning, who did not dwell on damnation but rather exulted in a sovereign but not at all distant God, a God whose glory was manifest in the goodness of the world and the potential of humanity."⁴

Calvin believed the entire creation is shouting out the glory of God, the love of God, the redemptive power of God's concern for us, all the time. Some see it, others don't. And the reason people can't see it – naturally, unaided – is because of the power of sin. Because of sin we can't see what's clearly there in front of our eyes. Because of selfishness, our egocentricity, because of our brokenness, of our refusal to live into the vision God has for us in Christ, we turn our eyes and so we fall. We have to stop

² John Calvin, cited in a lecture by Serene Jones, "Calvin, Creation, and the Holy Spirit." Calvin Jubilee, Montreat, NC, 9th July 2009.

³ From Calvin's Commentary on Psalm 104:331, quoted by William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 135.

⁴ Steinfels.

thinking of the Fall in Genesis as something that occurred once a long time ago. Every time we turn our face away from God, we fall. Every time we turn away, we fall – again and again and again. This is our condition. Calvin called it “total depravity” – this is *not* to say that there is no good in us, because there is; it is to say that there’s not an area of our lives that is so pure, so perfect, so good, so loving that we can freely choose the pure, the perfect, the good; there’s no place in our lives unaffected by the brokenness, the woundedness of the human condition. It’s total. It’s comprehensive. Sin is a problem – a huge problem – it constantly interferes with our ability to enjoy God – and we’re supposed to enjoy God. But we can’t will our way out of this predicament by being good.

Remember that “Little Engine That Could,” who made it to the top of the mountain through an effort of will? “I know I can. I know I can.” From a biblical perspective this is a deceptive strategy when it comes to God, or following Christ. Theologically speaking, we have to “Throw out the engine that could because you can’t.”⁵ We can’t work our way toward God. We are flawed through and through, every one of us, if not all the time, then often. We are continually dependent upon on the graciousness of God to intervene, to do for us what we can never do for ourselves – and that is to freely choose God and love God completely with all our mind, soul, heart, and strength. Theologian, Paul Lehmann (1906-1994), once said that Calvin’s doctrine of total depravity was a “most hopeful of all doctrines.”⁶ That might sound odd. Why hopeful? Because it acknowledges that the source of our salvation and the course of our eternal destiny is not contingent upon our ability to choose, to believe, or to be good, or perfect, or whatever. Think about it. To believe that the source of my salvation is dependent upon something that I have do, some good work or collection of works I have to do to made God happy, dependent upon something I have earned, to prove myself worthy of God’s love and acceptance, that God’s acceptance of me is contingent upon my ability to completely believe and trust one hundred percent in God would the worst possible sentence inflicted upon me. That’s not good news, gospel. In fact, it would be the worse possible news. It would be hell. Because then I would be left in a state – knowing my own brokenness and my woundedness and the tragic flaws in my own life – I would never be able to live up to some idealized vision of what I think God wants from me. That would not be grace, but something else.

⁵ Cynthia L. Rigby in her lecture, “Calvin and the Wondrous Glory of God.” Calvin Jubilee, Montreat, NC, 8 July 2009. I’m am indebted to Cindy’s lecture for providing a larger theological context in which to frame the doctrine of election.

⁶ Cited by Rigby.

And grace is God's eternal, free choice to say, *Yes* to me through Jesus Christ, and to say, *Yes*, to you through Jesus Christ. Because salvation is a gift that cannot be earned, because none of us are worthy, it has to be given – and it has been given, *already* through the grace of God revealed in life of Jesus Christ. God elects us, God chooses us, God makes the first move toward us. Calvin had such a high view of election – of predestination – not because he created the idea, but because it's all over scripture. God elects Abraham and his children and calls them to be a blessing to the world. God chooses people to kings and priests and prophets. Jesus calls the disciples, they did not choose him first. Even Jesus Christ is the elect of God through whom God chooses to redeem the world. The idea of election emerges from Paul's letter, especially this one to the Ephesians.

Through his experience of Jesus Christ, Paul came to understand – not in an intellectual way, but in an existential, heart-felt way – that he was acceptable in God's sight, not through any works of the law or merits, but through the glorious grace revealed in Jesus Christ. These verses, 3- 14, make up one long sentence in Greek – it's an effusive, dynamic, (over)flowing expression of affirmation that leads to a crescendo of confession.⁷ Jesus Christ has set us free and this freedom is granted to those who are far off and those who are near. We are abundantly free – accepted completely in the eyes of God. For it is God's plan, revealed in Jesus, to bring *all* people together into one people. God is working God's purpose out through everyone and everything. Jesus takes us up into the high places with him, with God, to find communion with God – Jesus takes us, escorts us into the presence of God – because we would never be able to get there on our own. Election is God's plan to include us in the work of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself said to his disciples, “You did not choose, but I chose you (John 15:16).” This comes as quite an ego-shock to us who like to think we're in control, that it's all about us, that we can choose what we believe and what don't believe, that we're responsible for our own salvation. The bad news to the ego is: *No, you're not*. The good news to the depths of our soul is: *No, you're not*. God is. God always makes the first move toward us. Even when we think we made the first move, it was God placing this yearning within us, illuminating the deepest desires of our hearts. In our faith and in our doubt, searching after God, God is drawing us into relationship with God.

The twentieth century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, heir of Calvin, stressed, through a reading of Ephesians 1:3-4, that when God said *Yes* to Jesus in raising him

⁷ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: “Christ...is the mirror, in which it behooves us to contemplate our election; and here we may do it with safety.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), III.xxiv.5.

from the grave, in saying Yes to Jesus “God has reached out to say yes to all human beings in Jesus Christ. This singular and potent, *Yes*, is the true biblical doctrine of election. It is not that God is bound to some and unbound to others. In the biblical doctrine of predestination, God is bound to each one of us by being bound to Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection.”⁸

A word of caution, this doctrine of election is not meant to be a matter of speculative debate. Who is elect? Who isn't? This is where the Calvinists who followed Calvin messed things up. They searched for proof of one's election. Who is in? Who is out? That's not for us to decide. Grace and with it election, for the two are related, “teaches that each of our lives is rooted in the gracious will and intentionality of God.” It's meant to be a doctrine of encouragement and hope.⁹

Why? Because God is working through us and is committed to us and will never leave us or abandon us. Why? Because God has work for you to do. Election is never a condition of privilege, but responsibility. Abraham, and through him Israel, were called, chosen, not because they were special, but because God had a job for them to do – to be a blessing to the world.

When we meditate and contemplate God's grace, the reality of our election – that God has actually chosen us – we soon discover that God has something in store for us to do, a new way to live and love, a new job to do, a new task, a project, a witness, a ministry – something.

This grace, this glorious grace is an extraordinary gift. To be chosen, to be elected, to be included in God's redemptive plan and purpose is an amazing gift. But as Paul suggests in this text, we're grafted, “adopted,” into God's plan – because God has work for us to do. When we remember our election, we find ourselves empowered to serve, to live, to love in new ways – to enjoy God in new ways.

God might have elected us from the foundations of the world, but the working out of that salvation is not yet complete. We work out our salvation individually, but also in and through the community – it's what the church is for. We might be elected, chosen by God in grace, but God isn't finished with us yet, no matter what age we might be. The poet Maya Angelou expresses her amazement at people who boast that they are saved, who think that their growth in grace stops with their profession of faith,

⁸ William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 48.

⁹ Johnson, 42.

or who are confident in their status as Christians. “You are a Christian?” she asks of them, of us. And she adds, “Already?”¹⁰ The Christian life for Paul, for Calvin, for us as a people reformed and always being reformed, is *living into* the people we are by God’s glorious grace through Jesus Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever in the depths of our hearts. We are called to *live into* our election. *Thanks be to God.*

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¹⁰ Cited in Johnson, 45.