

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Living the legacy

As 2009 draws to an end, we look back over a year that has been punctured by an extraordinary number of significant anniversaries. It is 100 years since Robert Baden-Powell started the Boy Scouts, 400 years since the first English Baptists appeared, 600 years since Lollardy was condemned as a heresy, 800 years since the ‘founding’ of Cambridge University, 900 years since the creation of the diocese of Ely and 1100 years since the formation of the diocese of Wells (Bath and Wells since 1245). If half-centuries are included, the list is even more impressive—150 years since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, 250 years since James Wolfe captured Quebec, 350 years since the beginning of regular meteorological observations in London (the first in the world) and 450 years since the Elizabethan settlement of the Church of England. These events have been celebrated (or not celebrated) in different ways, though most British people would agree that the award for the most ingenious commemoration must go to the Meteorological Office in London. Having predicted a warm summer, it then sat back to record the wettest July in its history, with nearly a foot of rain falling in some parts of the country!

But of all the memories evoked by this unusually rich year, perhaps the most interesting is the coincidence that makes it the 500th anniversary both of the accession of Henry VIII (on 22 April) and the birth of John Calvin (10 July). The two men never met or even corresponded, and it is doubtful whether the King of England ever heard of the Genevan reformer, who was only getting into his stride when Henry died, but it is fair to say that between them, they had a greater influence on the course of British religion and on the development of the Church of England than any comparable figures in our history. By breaking with Rome in 1534 (coincidentally also the year of Calvin’s conversion to Protestantism), Henry VIII set the Church of England on course to becoming an independent Reformed church. It was a controversial start to what we now think of as Anglicanism, but whatever Henry’s own intentions and theology may have been, once the break was made there could be no going back. Because (or in spite) of him, the nation became and has remained

Protestant, as have the countries which grew out of its subsequent overseas expansion and settlement.

The precise shape of that Protestantism however owes more to John Calvin than it does to Henry VIII, who never really broke with the traditional Catholicism of his youth. Calvin never visited England, but he corresponded with people there and welcomed British exiles in Geneva during the reactionary reign of Mary Tudor. It was in Geneva, under his auspices, that the best and most influential early English translation of the Bible appeared (in 1560) and relations between the Swiss city and the British Isles would remain close long after his death. Calvin's mentor, Martin Bucer, fled to England in 1548, and although he died there within a year, he made an impact on English theology and worship that can still be detected in the Book of Common Prayer. The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion follow the outline of Calvin's *Institutes* to a surprising extent, and their content is similar. It is no exaggeration to say that the theologians who shaped Anglican identity in the Elizabethan era were deeply indebted to Calvin, whose major works were quickly translated into English to become the staple diet of the new-style ordinands being turned out by the universities during those years. Not everyone was equally enthralled by this, of course, but opposition was muted and divided. Anglo-Catholic apologists have tried to find a coherent anti-Calvinistic Anglicanism which they attribute to such figures as Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes, but modern non-partisan research has generally shown that their claims cannot be sustained. They are based on the widespread but false assumption that Calvinism and Puritanism are essentially the same thing and that both go back to Calvin himself. In reality, conformist opinion in England was just as imbued with Calvin's mindset as any Puritan was. This can be seen from the career of Archbishop John Whitgift (1583-1604), whose theology was as Calvinist as anyone in Geneva could have hoped for but who was implacably opposed to Puritanism. It was not until the reign of Charles I (1625-49) that a small group of anti-Calvinists was able to influence the development of the Church of England, largely thanks to the king's patronage, but the end result of that was civil war and the overthrow of the high church party, which was seen by most people as an aberrant blemish on the doctrinal purity of the national church, a purity which they identified with the teachings of Calvin.

But although that is undoubtedly true, it must be said that Calvin's reputation among Anglicans today is not high. Presbyterians and other Reformed Protest-

ants continue to honour him as a foundational theologian comparable to Martin Luther, but while modern Anglicans are often ready to embrace Luther, they generally turn their backs on Calvin and think of him as somehow alien to their own outlook. To take but one prominent example, it is noticeable that the present archbishop of Canterbury is more at home with Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and liberal Protestants of various kinds than he is with Calvin and the Reformed tradition, towards which he exhibits a curious blindness. Others are more openly hostile, partly for reasons of churchmanship but mainly because of what they perceive to have been Calvin's theology. To them he was an intolerant bigot whose belief in predestination was so strong that he had no hesitation in condemning anyone who disagreed with him to hell, on the ground that if they differed from him they could not possibly be among the elect people of God. Opposition to Calvin is to be expected in high church and liberal circles, but it is also common among many who would consider themselves to be Evangelicals. The latter have often concluded that Calvin's stress on the sovereignty of God (with its concomitant belief in election and predestination) was such that he did not preach the gospel, because God had already saved those whom he had chosen. The fact that some Calvinistic societies have distinguished themselves by various forms of racism (apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the American South) which has occasionally been justified along predestinarian lines, has done nothing to change this perception, and it must be conceded that even now there are fringe groups on the margins of Reformed churches that continue to advocate un-Christian social policies (like the reintroduction of slavery) in the name of what they regard as Calvinism.

The fairness (or otherwise) of this assessment is seldom tested, because most of those who dismiss Calvinism for these reasons have made no effort to determine whether what passes under that name is a fair representation of the Genevan reformer's views. It can even be suggested that the fact that Calvin is so regularly treated in this way is a sign of his enduring greatness—he is the man everyone loves to hate! Nobody treats Martin Luther or Thomas Aquinas like that, not to speak of the English Reformers, whose personal views and theological outlook are unknown to the vast majority of people. Yet mention of the name of Calvin can still raise hackles, not least among those who have never read a word he wrote and do not intend to start now. On the other hand, Calvin can also attract admirers and followers in a way that remains unusual,

and it must be said that the existence of uncritical adulators tends to exacerbate the hostility that others feel towards him rather than bring light to our understanding of the man and his work. That is a pity, because not only has Calvin's influence on Anglicanism (in particular) been strong, but the recovery of that influence is essential if the church is ever to recover its vision and sense of purpose in the modern world. Nothing has weakened modern Anglicanism more than the erosion of its doctrine and discipline, the key areas in which the English Reformers who shaped the tradition drew most heavily on the thought of the great pastor of Geneva. Their circumstances were different, of course—England was not a small city state that could be controlled from a single church tower—but Calvin never suggested that the English should copy him in every respect. What mattered to him were the principles, not the details of their application to particular situations, and he was more willing than either the Lutherans or the counter-Reformation Catholics were to recognize that England was a special case needing special treatment. That his generosity in this respect was not taken on board by all of his followers is not his fault and it is absurd to dismiss him for that reason. His message and general approach were adopted by Anglicans in general and it is these that need to be recovered in the church today, not the exaggerations of some of his more extreme followers.

Calvin's importance for us today lies in the fact that he realised more clearly than most have done that there are three pillars of Christian teaching that must be distinguished, developed and kept in the right balance. The first of these pillars is biblical exegesis, the theme of his many commentaries. The Bible is the source of Christian doctrine and must therefore be studied carefully and consistently. It is no good reading only parts of it or interpreting some things in it in a way that makes them contradict other statements. Nor is it true that everything is of equal value in every circumstance, regardless of the context. Without good exegesis, it is possible to have a developed systematic theology and even a comprehensive pastoral practice (as Roman Catholics do) but the foundation of these is insecure. Today, the study of the Bible has progressed in ways that Calvin could not have imagined, but the task of the exegete remains as significant now as it ever was. The sad fact is that much of what passes for exegesis today is little more than special pleading for one cause or another. This has been abundantly clear in the debates over the ordination of women, a practice that can hardly be justified exegetically but which does not lack for

pseudo-support from Scripture, such as the extraordinary suggestion that Mary Magdalene was the first apostle because she was the first person to have seen the Risen Christ! That otherwise serious biblical scholars can say that kind of thing and go unchallenged is proof, if any were needed, that we are still a long way from having a church in which a sound understanding of God's Word can be taken for granted.

The next thing that Calvin is noted for is his dedication to a coherent theology, based on the principle of the absolute sovereignty of God. That principle is important because it protects both God's transcendent majesty and also his involvement with his creation, a balance which is easily lost by the widespread tendency to err in one direction or the other. It would seem obvious that if there is one God with one mind, there ought to be only one divine message, and that message should make sense. Put that way, most people would agree, but the minute you start to call this coherence 'systematic', hesitations arise.

Many Anglicans refuse to believe that ours is a confessional church because that would imply a system of interconnecting beliefs, while others (including many who would call themselves Evangelicals) dislike systematisation because they think it goes beyond what the Bible actually says. It is certainly true that we can over-systematise things, particularly when we are tempted to digress into areas on which the Bible itself is silent or reticent. For example, logic suggests that there must be a divine decree condemning those who are not predestined to salvation to eternal damnation instead, but the Scriptures do not dwell on this. We can make the point within the limits of our understanding, but having done that, we ought to respect the silence of Scripture and say as little about it as possible. If some people object to systematisation because others are tempted to transgress boundaries like this one, then so be it, but the temptation to overstate a case should not be allowed to lead to a position where the notion of a coherent biblical message is lost. What we say must tie in with the Scriptures as a whole, with what the Reformers called 'the whole counsel of God'. Today, many people have a reactive theology, based more on emotion than logic, which leads to incoherence once it is examined. For instance, most Christians are opposed to euthanasia, but many think there is nothing wrong with the annihilation of rebellious souls in hell. It never seems to occur to them that ending such apparently 'pointless' suffering is really just euthanasia after death! God hates nothing that he has made and even allows

Satan to go on existing, so why should he eliminate unbelieving human beings? We may find it hard to understand, but eternal punishment in hell is a kind of ‘life’ (in the sense of ongoing existence) and therefore preferable to death, just as life imprisonment on earth is better than execution. Think it through and you will soon see that logic produces a more satisfactory solution to this problem than a mere emotional reaction!

Finally, Calvin’s theology was a preached theology. It is a great misfortune that his sermons are less well-known than either his commentaries or his *Institutes*. Sermons do not travel well, it is true, but without them we cannot appreciate the dimension of pastoral application which was essential to Calvin’s theological enterprise. A theology that cannot be applied is no theology at all, and a theologian who cannot preach convincingly is betraying his calling. Conversely, all preachers are theologians of a kind—the only question is whether their theology is good or bad, coherent or incoherent, well constructed or cobbled together out of disparate elements. What we want are effective preachers, and only those who can handle the Word of God responsibly have any hope of achieving that. Most Anglican preaching today is poor because it is based on feelings and personal opinions, not on a reflective and relevant exposition of the Bible. Calvin’s mastery of the latter serves as a model to us today. It represents a benchmark against which we can measure ourselves and a standard to which we ought to expect the church as a whole to conform.

Much more could be said about all this, but in Calvin’s anniversary year, the importance of his witness and legacy needs to be restated for Anglicans, as well as for the Christian church as a whole. He was not perfect and it is always possible to pick at details of his expositions here and there, but to do that is to miss the point. Calvin did not want the church to parrot him, but to imitate his methods and discover the hidden depths of God’s Word. It is a challenge that remains as vital now as it ever was. Our church may owe its freedom to Henry VIII but it owes its soul to John Calvin, whose message and example shaped it during the crucial decades of its formation. Half a millennium later, we are still living the legacy bequeathed to us at that time and have not yet exhausted the resources which it provides.

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