

ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION September 2011

The church's *Protestant* reformation began to get traction with Luther. Recall, he was a faithful Roman Catholic (read *conventional Western Christian*) who simply wanted to reform the church of which he was part, maintaining Catholic piety and sacraments. Indeed, there were other reformers within the Roman precincts: Theresa, John of the Cross, Ignatius Loyola were very much Catholic reformers who wished do away with abuses while maintaining the medieval synthesis. The Middle Ages, however, had ended. The Protestant effort was not to be checked. **John Calvin** (1509-1564) was a second influential protestant leader and theologian. Much of what early Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) held to be true of God, Jesus, church, etc., goes back to Calvin and his systematic theology, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Calvin was French, and very much inclined to *the new thinking* that characterized the Renaissance, thinking that was not so bound to traditional medieval and churchly assumptions. A century later, scientific method would be proposed by Francis Bacon and others; but the beginnings of scientific thought, in terms of assumptions, are already to be seen in the *Institutes*. Previous to this time it was assumed that God unilaterally held all of reality, from mountains and seas and stars down to the hairs on your head, in place sort of like ingredients suspended in stew. Were God to let the divine awareness slip for a moment, all would fall apart. In the new thought, however, human reason was beginning to recognize *patterns*, recognizable ways in which God might be suspending not so much each and every thing by itself, but by means of *recognizable, lawful systems* might be holding all things together. Calvin wrote a *systematic* theology. His *Institutes* describes God's activity in terms of what he considered to be these recognizable patterns, without ascribing all authority to churchly traditions or hierarchies. It was now the *patterns and their recognizable predictability* that were authoritative, patterns any thinking person could recognize, rather than official pronouncements from on high dished out by church bureaucrats. Subsequent thinkers, following his example, would popularize Calvin's thought by talking about God's *plan of salvation*. Do you see how *the issue of authority* moves during this period? No longer is the tradition itself, or any of its official spokespersons, in possession of the final word. Rather, any intelligent person by examining the patterns of God's activity can come to understand divine truth. Authority is starting to move from *ecclesiastical office* to *human reason*, even that of a lay person!

John Calvin meant for his work to reassure Christians that, secure in the arms of God and safe from a corrupt and venal church, they could celebrate the opportunity to live productively *in this world*. His is a theology of joy. Unfortunately, those he subsequently influenced (Puritans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists) tended to subtract the celebration and the joy from Christian faith, as we may see a little later on. Referencing them, we could imagine him saying, "Thank God I am Calvin and not a calvinist!"

Like Luther and other Protestant thinkers, Calvin subscribed to three doctrines that opposed Roman Catholic theology. *Sola fide*, faith alone, meant we are justified by faith, not by works. *Sola gratia*, grace alone, meant we are saved by grace, and cannot *deserve* salvation, nor can we *earn* our way into heaven. *Sola scriptura*, scripture alone, meant nothing is required for salvation that isn't in the Bible. Do you see how the medieval church was challenged? No longer could the church prescribe works by means of which you could merit or earn your way out of purgatory or into heaven. No longer could it threaten to withhold salvation were you to refuse the works. No longer could Plato or Aristotle supplant plain scripture. With these three doctrines the Protestant movement challenged Roman hegemony over Christianity in the West.

In order to preserve *the godness of God*, Calvin argued that God elects those God wills for salvation, eternally choosing who will be saved, by grace adopting them as children. This is congruent with the idea that we can't merit or earn our way, manipulating God, so to speak. This notion is called *predestination*. What was new with Calvin's view on this matter was the idea that we can *know* whether we are among the elect. A darker side of this view logically is that, if God chooses who's in, God also chooses who's out. If God works in that fashion, what happens to human responsibility in either case?

Reformed Protestants (Calvinists) tend to worry about whether their faith is *real*, or *enough* and rely on inner assurance and/or external "fruit of the Spirit" in daily life, inventorying their feelings and actions and judging whether these are consistent with saving faith. Do you have any "salvation anxieties?" What happened to the joy, the celebration of gospel life? What authorizes your response?