



# Conference Dinner Address

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From 28–30 August 2009 the United Theological College (UTC), in North Parramatta, Sydney, in cooperation with the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre (PACT) of Charles Sturt University (CSU), Australia, hosted a conference to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin in 1509. UTC is a member institution of the School of Theology of CSU and most of its staff researchers are within PACT, one of CSU's strategic research centres. The conference was entitled: 'Calvin 500: Calvin Goes Public'. It thus brought together scholars from both CSU and other universities to reflect on the public nature of Calvin's thought, life and work.

I wonder if Jean Cauvin (1509–1564), or Ioannis Calvinus, or John Calvin, or Martianus Lucianus (this last work an anagram for Calvinus), of Noyon, Picardy, in France would have been happy with such a conference. I am sure that he would have been enthusiastic for there to have been discussions on the central issues which he raised, especially if those issues were not crowded by other, peripheral matters. He would also have been very heartened by discussions on these central issues of his thought and life so long as they were not overshadowed by historical relativism. For him, the issues would need to be dealt with for what they were and are. However, I am quite certain that he would have very much disliked any celebration of him himself. He died aged fifty-four, and he is buried in an unmarked grave in the *Cimetière de Plainpalaise* in Geneva. He was buried in an unmarked grave because, when his body was laid in state, so many people came to see it, that the other Reformers in Geneva were afraid that his place of burial would become a place of devotion, and that they would be accused of fostering the cult of a new saint. In fact, in the nineteenth century, there was an attempt to identify one of the graves in the *Cimetière* as his. So he would want us to think of his ideas and his passions, but he would certainly not want us in any way to attempt to venerate him.

In personal terms, he lived a very hard life. The things that grieved him in human terms were many. They included the fact that he was an exile from his own beloved France. His short marriage to his wife Idelette was full of pain. On the 28 July 1542 she gave birth to a son, Jacques. The child was born prematurely and survived only briefly. Idelette became ill in 1545 and died on the 29 March 1549. He never married again. He later wrote to his friend Vriet: 'I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life.' He was ridiculed, and even physically attacked, at times in Geneva (sometimes referred to, with a variety of implications, as 'a Presbyterian Sparta'). His behaviour over the execution of Michael Servetus in 1553 is highly ambiguous. On the 27 October 1553, Servetus was burnt alive at the *Plateau de Champel*, at the edge of Geneva, on the top of a pyre of his own books. This was the final insult, to be burnt using the fuel of one's own despised, and heretical, works. Calvin's involvement in this has been the subject of great controversy. Conclusions remain ambivalent.

So what are we to see today in his heritage? Whatever one may say, one has to say that Calvin's influence is enormous, among other things, in theology, in the history of the church ecumenical, especially the western church, in the development of the nation-state, especially in western liberal democracies, in

public policy and in economics. The chapters of this book will draw out these factors.

At the outset, however, it seems that there are four fundamental issues that one needs to note, before one goes on to consider Calvin's public influence, as they are central to his self-understanding.

First, there is the very basic factor, that Calvin is immensely helpful to anyone who wants to understand the Bible. This has been pointed to again in this five hundredth anniversary year of his birth by George Hunsinger.<sup>1</sup> Of course he is a person of his time. Of course in his Commentaries he does not see the range of hermeneutical questions in the ways in which we see them today. Of course he has tirades against the 'Jews and the Papists'. However, he will tell you what the text is really about in his view. His exegesis, like that of Barth, is theological. Again, like Barth, his varied exegetical methodologies are unique.<sup>2</sup> Many commentaries will tell you interesting facets about the worlds of the Old and New Testaments, and the debates will continue as to which world, or which part of that world, is the most apposite or relevant. Many will also tell you which hermeneutical approach or approaches you should use as primary. However, the preacher or the Christian believer is then still left with the question as to why he or she should be interested in this text at all. Calvin, like Barth, will tell you where the voice of God is in all of this. When I began to preach, in Ireland in 1972, having read through the commentaries, I would read what Calvin and Barth had to say because I dearly wanted to know what the passage was actually about in theological terms. Sometimes I would agree with Calvin. At other times I would think that he, like Barth, was completely and utterly misguided. Nevertheless, reading him forced me, as one responsible for preaching the word Sunday by Sunday, to make up my mind, under God, as to what it was all about. People like that are very rare indeed. For this reason Calvin is not a saint. More importantly, he is a *Doctor Ecclesiae*.

Second, Calvin understood the necessity of the confessing nature of theology and of the confessing call upon the church. In his time this confessing was both a matter of proclaiming the faith and of educating in the faith. It was also both apologetic and confrontational. It was a constant reminder not of 'who we are' but of 'whose we are.' Confessing in our time has been a strong representation of that tradition, as for example in the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa of 1986 against apartheid. However, it is more than just the matter of the current manifestations of the confessing tradition. It is that in our time this tradition becomes very important to theology throughout the world once again. It is most important for the ecumenical church. In 1974 T. H. L. Parker, in his biography of Calvin, made the very significant point that the theology of Calvin needs now to be seen from the perspective of the period after both Barth and Vatican II. Parker was reacting to the fact that writings on Calvin prior to that often seemed to purely relegate Calvin to a historical position, no longer relevant. As Parker puts it, 'to treat of Calvin now without taking into account both Barth's criticisms of Calvin and also the new light he has shed on many of Calvin's doctrines would be to label oneself as

<sup>1</sup>George Hunsinger, 'Calvin at 500', *Theology Today*, Vol. 66, No. 2, 2009, pp. 131–134.

<sup>2</sup>See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1988, *passim*.

hopelessly archaic'.<sup>3</sup> Parker continues: 'to one living after Vatican II and after Karl Barth, they<sup>4</sup> seem woefully weak interpreters of his theology—no doubt because they thought it was a thing of the past.'<sup>5</sup> Barth and Vatican II, and the recent revival in interest in both internationally, make Calvin and the confessing nature of his theology, once again central for the whole of Christian existence today.

Third and closely related to this second point, there is Calvin's insistence on the unity of the church. This is of great importance in our time, with the formal international ecumenical movement appearing to be losing its way. Here, moreover, is the great dislocation between Calvin on the one hand and the Reformed Church on the other, in that the Reformed Church has had a strong tendency to constantly divide organically. The concept of union with Christ, so central to Barth, has in his words 'a comprehensive and basic significance for Calvin. Indeed we might almost call it his conception of the essence of Christianity.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed Calvin states: 'What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of doctrine or sacraments but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the Church.'<sup>7</sup> This unity is exhibited in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, which are *wahre Zeichen*, true signs by which the communion of Christ's body and blood is shown forth (*exhabeatur*).<sup>8</sup> Calvin is far indeed from being sectarian. He speaks to us, for indeed it may be today that much of the church, especially in the west, tends by its life, if not by its intention, in one way or another to be sectarian.

Fourth, Calvin understood public theological freedom to be central to the life of Christianity. The concept of union with Christ in Calvin, as noted above, also has radical implications for theological freedom in church and world. There has been a strong anti-Erastian element in the Reformed tradition, which emanates from Calvin. Statesmen and politicians from time to time have accused this element of being a desire of theocracy. Nevertheless, need in a community may not be due to a lack of social services, but to something fundamentally wrong with the society itself. However such criticism of the state and of society may have been misused, this element nevertheless represents a service which the church must render. This Calvin carried out, as seen in the analysis of Raymond Mentzer: 'They instituted poor relief programs which not only materially assisted the impoverished but delivered a strong measure of spiritual, economic and social direction.'<sup>9</sup> Again André Bieler points to this factor when he states of Calvin that 'the inflexible firmness of the city's spiritual leader triumphed in the end.'<sup>10</sup> The social or political structure may need radical reformation which the community itself is incapable of carrying out. Christians and the church in such societies may believe that they are called, unpopular though it is, openly to criticise the whole political or social

<sup>3</sup>T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, London, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1975, p. v.

<sup>4</sup>That is, earlier interpreters of Calvin, including Williston Walker (1906), H. Y. Rayburn (1914), R. N. C. Hunt (1933) and J. Mackinnon (1936).

<sup>5</sup>Parker, *John Calvin*, p. vi.

<sup>6</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 4: 3/2 at p. 551.

<sup>7</sup>*Institutes* III: 19, 7; IV: 10, 32.

<sup>8</sup>See J. T. McNeill, 'Calvin as an Ecumenical Churchman', *Church History*, Supplement, Vol. 57, 1988, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond A. Mentzer, 'The Piety of Townspeople and City Folk', *Reformation Christianity (A People's History of Christianity)*, Vol. 5, ed. Peter Matheson, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup>André Bieler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, ed. Edward Dommen, trans. James Grieg, Geneva, WARC/WCC, 2005, p. 92.

structure.<sup>11</sup> In these circumstances public theology needs to be strengthened, as it may be so weak and accommodating that it is incapable of carrying out this service pointed to so clearly by Calvin. Calvin is central to public theology.

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<sup>11</sup>See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4. 3/2 at p. 892.