

John Calvin: Reformed Catholic

By Rich Lusk

John Calvin was a Reformed Catholic. While his followers may have descended into some of the grossest forms of sectarianism in the history of the church, Calvin himself modeled the kind of patience, humility, charity, and wise tolerance that promotes a catholic spirit. Calvin understood that there was a core of orthodoxy and orthopraxy that was non-negotiable. But beyond that, we might have to bear with all kinds of faults in our brothers and sisters. In *Institutes* IV.i.12, he writes:

What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith . . . Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over nonessential matters should in nowise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss salvation . . . In the meantime, if we

try to correct what displeases us, we do so out of duty . . . From this it is clear that every member of the church is charged with the responsibility of public edification according to the measure of his grace, provided he perform it decently and in order. That is, we are neither to renounce the communion of the church nor, remaining in it, to disturb its peace and duly ordered discipline.

Calvin's rule is a helpful one: whatever doctrinal shortcomings will not cause loss of salvation are to be borne within the catholic community, though we ought to lovingly correct as much error as we can. Unity is the goal, but if we cannot attain it because of the weakness of men, we must bear with one another's faults.

In IV.i.13-15, Calvin deals with moral imperfections in the same wise, pastoral fashion. He counsels that even in cases of severe disciplinary breakdown, individuals should not be quick to claim the right of separation:

And indeed, if churches are well ordered, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom . . . But because pastors are not always zealously on the watch, and are also sometimes more lenient than they should be, or are hindered from being able to exercise the severity they would like, the result is that even the openly wicked are not always removed from the company of the saints. This I admit to be a fault and I do not intend to excuse it, since Paul sharply rebukes it in the Corinthians. But even if the church be slack in its duty, still each and every individual has not the right at once to take upon himself the decision to separate. Indeed, I do not deny that it is the godly man's duty to abstain from all familiarity with the wicked, and not to

enmesh himself with them in any voluntary relationship. But it is one thing to flee the boon companionship of the wicked; another, in hating them, to renounce the communion of the church.

Obviously, Calvin does not have in view leaving one local church for another since his comments predate the rise of competing denominations in a given locale. Still, his points are very relevant to our contemporary situation.

Calvin not only modeled catholicity at the institutional level, he also did so at the interpersonal level. At one point, Martin Luther directed one of his typical, but unfortunate, outbursts of rage towards the Swiss reformers. Heinrich Bullinger, in particular, was hit hard. Bullinger sought Calvin's advice. Calvin's wise, balanced reply demonstrated tremendous love and mercy:

I hear that Luther has at length broken forth in fierce invective, not so much against you as against the whole of us. On the present occasion, I dare scarce venture to ask you to keep silence, because it is neither just that innocent persons should thus be harassed, nor that they should be denied the opportunity of clearing themselves; neither, on the other hand, is it easy to determine whether it would be prudent for them to do so. But of this I do earnestly desire to put you in mind, in the first place, that you would consider how eminent a man Luther is, and the excellent endowments wherewith he is gifted, with what strength of mind and resolute constancy, with how great skill, with efficiency and power of doctrinal statement, he hath hitherto devoted his whole energy to overthrow the reign of Antichrist, and at the same time to diffuse far and near the

doctrine of salvation. *Often I have been wont to declare, that even although he were to call me a devil, I should still not the less hold him in such honor that I must acknowledge him to be an illustrious servant of God* (Translated by David Constable, Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 432-3, emphasis mine).

Without whitewashing Luther's sin, Calvin does his utmost to preserve unity at all costs among fellow members of the body of Christ. Without overlooking Luther's flaws, he emphasizes his positive traits and accomplishments. Without becoming full of self-pity or spite, Calvin puts the cause of Christ and the well-being of his church above his own reputation and standing.

I have read and listened to numerous expositions of Calvinism through the years; unfortunately, I have never heard these ecumenical qualities included as part of the presentation. In light of today's mess in the Reformed world, we are more than justified in asking, "Where are the true Calvinists? Who are Calvin's real heirs?" Sadly, they are few and far between. To be true to the spirit of Calvin, we must pursue a Reformed Catholicism.