

Being Reformed: A Very Brief History

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Abstract: *This article provides a cursory survey of the history of the Reformed movement. It begins with exemplary elements that can be found in the second generation reformer, John Calvin, and then beyond the stream into the river of commonalities in the breadth of the movement. It also identifies the place Reformed leaders played in eighteenth-century revival and in the nineteenth-century defence of the faith, and beyond.*

Keywords: Calvin, “one river,” commonalities, breadth, revival, defence, renewal

FIVE HALLMARKS FROM THE CONVERSION AND MINISTRY OF CALVIN

Of all the various Reformers, John Calvin (1509–1564) was the most self-effacing. Only three times in his life, for instance, did he feel impelled to be autobiographical in works destined for public consumption. The most extensive of these was his “Preface” to his Commentary on the Psalms (1557), in which he set out the way God led him to become a Reformer in the city of Geneva. He related the way that his father, having originally sent him to Paris to study philosophy in preparation for theology, changed his mind about his son’s future and ordered him to go to Orleans, there to study for a career in law. Calvin noted:

To this pursuit [of the study of law] I endeavoured faithfully to apply myself, in obedience to the will of my father; but God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a different direction to my course. At first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.¹

This is the longest account that we have of Calvin's conversion from his own hand. What is especially noteworthy about it is that it contains a number of emphases that will become integral to the Reformed Faith.

First, there is the emphasis on the gracious providential working of God. The Reformed Faith has historically had a deep conviction that God is the sovereign Lord of history. History is totally under his control.

Then, Calvin ascribes his spiritual rescue to God alone. There is no mention in this text of any human instruments whom God used to bring Calvin to saving faith, men such as Melchior Wolmar (1497-1560), the German evangelical who taught him koine Greek at Orleans, or his cousin Pierre Olivétain (1506-1538), who translated the New Testament into French, or the early Protestant martyr Étienne de la Forge (1510-1535), with whom Calvin lodged while in Paris. Nor is there any mention of human writings that he must have read, works by Martin Luther (1483-1546), for instance. But this is typical of Calvin and the Reformed Faith: an emphasis on God alone as Sav-

1 John Calvin, "Preface" in his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), I, xl-xliv, *passim*.

your that God alone might receive the glory. Here, in this account of Calvin's conversion we see implicitly the Reformed emphasis on the glory of God being the end of all creation. Recall the first question and answer of The Shorter Westminster Catechism: "What is the chief end of man?" "To glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Third, in the phrase "sudden conversion," the word translated "sudden" is *subita*, which in Latin can mean "unexpected," and this is probably the better translation. In other words, Calvin's conversion was not the result of any wish or intention of Calvin. One of Calvin's natural characteristics was a resistance to change, as he indicates in this text. But God broke into his life, and, as this passage intimates, brought to pass a completely unexpected upheaval that caused him to totally change his views of God and salvation and led him to embrace evangelical doctrine as the truth. And this conversion made Calvin teachable and submissive to the rule of Christ. Just as God is sovereign in history, in the affairs of nations and peoples, so he is sovereign in the individual lives of men and women. When he determines to save a sinner, that person will be saved. Here we see the great Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace and its attendant doctrine of election.

Moreover, Calvin states that "inspired by a taste of true religion" he lost interest in his law studies. His work in law was not immediately dropped, out of deference to his father, but it was certainly relativized by the desire to grow in true godliness. The language that Calvin uses here is noteworthy. There is a strong tradition of thought about Calvin that depicts him as cold and unemotional. But this account of his conversion indicates the exact opposite: he had an unusually ardent nature. In fact, as J. Nigel Westhead pointed out in a paper on Calvin at the 1995 Westminster Conference, all one has to do is examine Calvin's prayers to find "an experiential believer of considerable ... warmth."² Calvin's conversion was not merely enlightenment; it

2 Nigel Westhead, "Calvin and Experiential Knowledge of God" in *Adorning the Doctrine: Papers read at the 1995 Westminster Conference* ([London]: The Westminster Conference, [1996]), 16. He is citing a statement of James A. de Jong.

was nothing less than an unreserved, wholehearted commitment to the living God. This ardent commitment finds pictorial expression in his so-called crest or seal, which pictures a heart upon an open, outstretched hand, with a motto underneath that reads: *Cor meum tibi offero Domine prompte et sincere* (“My heart I give Thee, Lord, eagerly and earnestly.”) Here we see the rich spirituality that has marked the Reformed Faith.

In the providence of God, Calvin was led to Geneva, where he became the leading teaching elder in the city. Calvin came to look upon his life work in Geneva primarily as preaching the Word of God and thereby instructing believers in sound doctrine. He was, of course, involved in pastoral work, but the centre of his ministry was the preaching of the Scriptures. By this means, Calvin says time and again, God reveals himself in judgement and mercy, turning hearts to obedience, confirming the faith of believers, building up and purifying the Church. This has also been a hallmark of the Reformed Faith: both the centrality of the preaching of the Word in worship and the authority of the Scriptures for life and doctrine.

MORE THAN ONE FOUNTAINHEAD BUT ONE RIVER

Of course, Calvin was not the only shaper of the Reformed Faith during the time of the Reformation. There were others: in Geneva itself, Pierre Viret (1510–1571) and Guillaume Farel (1489–1565) laboured with Calvin; in other parts of Switzerland there was Johann Oecolampadius (1482–1531) in Basel, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) and Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) in Zurich. Further afield, there was John Knox (c. 1513–1572) in Scotland and Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) and John Hooper (c. 1495–1555) in England. In fact, during the Reformation there emerged Reformed churches in Switzerland, Germany, France, Holland, the British Isles, and Hungary. Not surprisingly, given the various locales in which these churches developed, there was some diversity among them. But they shared a number of things in common, five of which we have already noted

in commenting on the conversion account of Calvin. Other areas of similarity would be:

1. A greatly simplified form of worship—a radical break with the worship traditions of the medieval church and much simpler than the Lutheran style of worship.

2. Church government was placed in the hands of the ministers and elders—thus the term Presbyterian. This was a break obviously with the monarchical Episcopacy that characterized the papal church of the Middle Ages, but it also meant a rejection of any sort of Episcopal succession. During the time of the Reformation, it was the only effective alternative to the medieval Episcopal system. In the seventeenth century, in England there emerged in the Reformed tradition the polity of Congregationalism, represented, for example, in the so-called Independents/Congregationalists and the Particular Baptists. In fact, from the eighteenth century onwards, Presbyterian life especially in America has known a congregational element as congregations have called their elders and ministers. There is no doubt that the democratic ethos in America has shaped American Presbyterianism.

3. The importance of confessional texts as a means of maintaining doctrinal purity. There is, for example, the Tetrapolitan Confession, one of the earliest Reformed confessions, which was prepared in 1530 by the German Reformers Martin Bucer (1491–1551), Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541), and Caspar Hedio (1494/5–1552). Again, at the outset of the Reformation in Francophone Geneva, Calvin, possibly with the aid of Guillaume Farel, drew up the 1536 Geneva Confession. A later French Calvinist standard is the Confession of La Rochelle (1559). Or there is that earliest of Scottish Reformed confessions, the Scottish Confession of Faith (1560). Later, there would be the Irish Articles (1615), and that definitive confessional standard, The Westminster Confession (1646), from which came the Congregationalist confession The Savoy Declaration (1658) and the Particular Baptist Second London Confession of Faith (1677/1688).

There is little doubt though that the cutting edge of Protestantism all through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the Reformed Faith represented by such groups as:

- The Scottish Presbyterians who had established the Reformed Faith as the state church in Scotland by the 1560s.

- The Dutch Calvinists in Holland who led the struggle against the foreign domination of Spain in an eighty-year war for independence.

- The French Huguenots who at one time comprised ten percent of the population in France, around two million believers in total (this included fifty percent of both the upper and middle classes).

- The English Puritans who failed in their attempt to bring complete Reformation to the Church of England after roughly a hundred years of struggle (1560s–1662). The failure of the Puritans to establish a fully Reformed Church in England led to the exodus of many of them to the America where, in England, they sought to found a model of pure Christianity, a “city set on a hill,” as they called it.

BEING REFORMED AND COMMITTED TO REVIVAL—THE WITNESS OF SAMUEL DAVIES

By the eighteenth century, however, the Reformed Faith was in disarray in various parts of the Protestant world. Geneva had become a centre of liberalism. The French Huguenots had undergone vicious persecution throughout the seventeenth century and upwards of half a million of them left their native land in the 1680s. Puritan New England was no longer the shining light it had aspired to be. And in British Isles, the various Reformed communities—be they Presbyterian, Congregationalist or Baptist—were experiencing severe challenges. English Presbyterianism was descending fast into the quagmire of Unitarianism and Arminianism. All too many of the Congregationalists and Calvinistic Baptists were stagnant as churches, stuck fast in the mud of High or hyper-Calvinism. And Scottish Presbyterianism was also afflicted by liberal theology. Little wonder that William

Cooper (1694–1743), the Congregationalist minister of Brattle Street Church, Boston, wrote in 1741:

What a dead and barren time has it now been, for a great while, with all the churches of the Reformation? The golden showers have been restrained; the influences of the Spirit suspended; and the consequence has been, that the gospel has not had any eminent success. Conversions have been rare and dubious; few sons and daughters have been born to God; and the hearts of Christians not so quickened, warmed, and refreshed under the ordinances, as they have been.³

Among the reasons contributing to this spiritual malaise in the opening decades of the eighteenth century, may be listed the decay of ministerial authority, the growth of rationalism, the spread of material wealth and “luxury,” and the frivolity and spiritual indifference of the young.

But all of this changed in the course of the eighteenth century as revival swept the English-speaking world on both sides of the Atlantic and Reformed communities became the main centres of revival:

- In Wales, there were the Calvinistic Methodists.
- In Scotland, the movement of awakening can be traced as far back as the ministries of Thomas Boston and the Erskine brothers the early decades of the eighteenth century.
- In England, there was the remarkable ministry of the Calvinistic Anglican George Whitefield (1714–1770) and later in that century, Particular Baptist leaders like Abraham Booth (1734–1806), Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), and William Carey (1761–1834).

3 William Cooper, “To the Reader” in Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (Edinburgh: T. Lumisden and J. Robertson, 1742), viii. The Scottish Presbyterian John Willison (1680–1750), who introduced this volume with his own preface, concurred as to the churches in Scotland: “We in this Church and land may acknowledge with deep regret ...that it hath been a dead, barren and backsliding time with us for many years past” (“Preface to the Scots Reader” in Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, iii).

• And in America, God raised up the greatest theologian in American history, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), who has been rightly described as “America’s Augustine.”⁴

Let me focus ever so briefly, though, on another figure in this era of Reformed revival, the Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies (1723–1761), whom D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once described as “the greatest preacher” ever produced in America.⁵ Converted in 1738, Davies went on train for the ministry and was eventually called to preach to a congregation in Hanover County, Virginia. Davies began his ministry preaching in a meeting-house that has been described as “a plain, unpretending wooden building, capable of containing about five hundred people.”⁶ In addition to this, there were three other preaching places established in Hanover and Henrico counties. These soon turned out to be insufficient. Soon the total number of preaching places rose to seven, with an eighth added in 1750. Three years after his settlement there were three hundred communicants at the Lord’s Supper, and in 1753 some five or six hundred.

Something of this blessing is seen in the following comment made by a man who lived in nearby Richmond County in 1755: “When I go amongst Mr Davies’ people, religion seems to flourish; it is like the suburbs of heaven...”⁷

It is important to note that Davies would have ascribed all of this to God the Holy Spirit’s gracious work. As he stated in 1752 in his sermon *The Success of the Ministry of the Gospel owing to a Divine Influence*:

4 Advertisement for “Global Jonathan Edwards Congress 2020” (<https://www.jed-con2020.be/>).

5 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “What Is Preaching?” in his *Knowing the Times. Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions 1942–1977* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 263.

6 William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia Historical and Biographical* (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1850), 172.

7 Cited Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 13.

If ... a well-disposed Lydia gives a believing attention to the things spoken by Paul, it is, “because the Lord hath opened her heart,” Acts 16:14. ... the first implantation of grace in the heart of a sinner is entirely the work of God.⁸

DIVISIONS AND RESURGENCE

In the nineteenth century, Davies’ Presbyterian heirs would split in 1861 over the issue of slavery into the Northern and Southern Presbyterians. Northern Presbyterians like Elijah Lovejoy (1802–1837) and Arthur Tappan (1786–1865) were among the most ardent of abolitionists, while Southern Presbyterians like J. H. Thornwell (1812–1862) and R. L. Dabney (1820–1898) were zealous defenders of the institution of slavery.⁹ Further divisions came in the early twentieth century with the battle over liberal theology in what is called the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. While the schism that came to the Northern Presbyterian ranks was not large, yet it produced one of the most significant Reformed leaders of the twentieth century, Gresham Machen (1881–1937), the key leader of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church until his death.

These struggles with liberalism had been central to Presbyterian battles going back into the previous century. For example, the Scottish Presbyterian minister Horatius Bonar (1808–1889) could write in the “Preface” to a book entitled *Catechisms of the Scottish Reformation*:

8 Samuel Davies, *The Success of the Ministry of the Gospel, owing to a Divine Influence* in his *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 5th ed. (New York: T. Allen, 1792), III, 194–195, *passim*.

9 There was a similar division among Calvinistic Baptists in America, who divided over the issue of slavery in 1845. The Particular Baptists in England were uniformly opposed to slavery and the slave-trade. See *Preaching Deliverance to the Captives: Particular Baptist Sermons on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, compiled and ed. Matthew E. Rose (N.p., 2021).