

Note: July 10, 2009 marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the Genevan Reformer whose life and teaching have left an indelible mark on the Church, as well as on western history and society. Throughout 2009, *Auke Talk* is reprinting a series of "Celebrating Calvin" articles from *Modern Reformation* magazine by David Hall, Presbyterian pastor and chair of the Calvin 500 Celebration. The first, "Ten Ways Modern Culture is Different because of John Calvin," will be presented in parts (1 and 2 in this issue). Our hope is that whatever you have heard about Calvin, good or ill, this year you will learn some things about him that you didn't before. Perhaps you might even be encouraged to read some of Calvin's very accessible writings for yourself...

Celebrating Calvin

Ten Ways Modern Culture Is Different Because of John Calvin

David W. Hall

1. Education: The Academy

Calvin broke with medieval pedagogy that limited education primarily to an aristocratic elite. His Academy, founded in 1559, was a pilot in broad-based education for Geneva. Although Genevans had sought for two centuries to establish a university, only after Calvin's settlement did a college finally succeed. (1) By the time of Calvin's arrival, city officials yearned for a premier educational institution, but in 1536 most Genevans thought this was a target too ambitious. Regardless of the unsuccessful starts in education that had occurred between Geneva's adoption of the Reformation in 1536 and Calvin's return from his Strasbourg exile in 1541, it is clear that success in establishing a lasting university did not occur until Calvin set his hand to the educational plow after Geneva became settled in its Protestant identity in the 1550s.

Calvin's Academy, which was adjacent to St. Pierre Cathedral, featured two levels of curricula: one for the public education of Geneva's youth (the college or *schola privata*) and the other a seminary to train ministers (*schola publica*). (2) One should hardly discount the impact that came from the public education of young people, especially in a day when education was normally reserved only for aristocratic scions or for members of Catholic societies. Begun in 1558, (3) with Calvin and Theodore Beza chairing the theological faculty, the Academy building was dedicated on June 5, 1559, with 600 people in attendance in St. Pierre Cathedral. Calvin collected money for the school, and many expatriates donated to help its formation. The public school, which had seven grades, enrolled 280 students during its inaugural year, and the Academy's seminary expanded to 162 students in just three years. By Calvin's death in 1564, there were 1,200 students in the college and 300 in the seminary. Both schools, as historians have observed, were tuition-free and "forerunners of modern public education." (4) Few European institutions ever saw such rapid growth.

To accommodate the flood of students, the Academy planned to add-in what would become characteristic of the Calvinistic view of Christian influence in all areas of life—departments of law and medicine. Beza requested prayer for the new medical department as early as 1567, by which time the law school was established. Following the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre (1572), Francis Hotman—and several other leading constitutional scholars—taught at the Genevan law school. The presence of two legal giants, Hotman (from 1573-78) and Denis Godefroy, gave Calvin's Academy one of the earliest Swiss legal faculties. The medical school, attempted shortly after Calvin's death, was not successfully established until the 1700s. (5) Calvin's Academy became the standard bearer for education in all major fields.

Historically, education, as much as any other single factor, has fostered cultural and political advancement. One of Calvin's most enduring contributions to society—a contribution that also secured the longevity of many of the Calvinistic reforms—was the establishment of the Academy in Geneva. Through his Academy, Calvin also succeeded where others had failed. Worth noting, none of the other major Protestant Reformers are credited with founding a university that would last for centuries, even becoming a sought-after property by some surprising suitors—like Thomas Jefferson. (6)

2. Care for the Poor: The Bourse Française

Most people don't associate Calvin with sympathy for the poor or indigent. However, a cursory review of his care for orphans, the indigent, and displaced refugees in a period of crisis not only shows otherwise but also provides enduring principles for societal aid for the truly needy.

Calvin thought that the church's compassion could best be expressed through its ordained deacons, the epitome of private charity. The challenge for Calvin was to derive practical protocols that would care for the poor, using the diaconal mechanisms that God had already provided through the church's ministry of mercy.

Jeannine Olson's able historical volume *Calvin and Social Welfare: Deacons and the Bourse Française* is an eye-opening study of Calvin's impact on Reformation culture, focusing particularly on the enduring effect of his thought on social welfare through the church's diaconate. In her treatise, she noted that, contrary to some modern caricatures, the Reformers worked diligently to shelter refugees and to minister to the poor. The Bourse Française became a pillar of societal welfare in Geneva; (7) in fact, this mercy ministry may have had nearly as much influence in Calvin's Europe as his theology did in other areas.

The activities of the Bourse were numerous. Its diaconal agents were involved in housing orphans, the elderly, or those who were incapacitated. They sheltered the sick and dealt with those involved in immoralities. This ecclesiastical institution was a precursor to voluntary societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the West. Calvin was so interested in seeing the diaconate flourish that he left part of his family inheritance in his will for the Boys School and poor strangers. (8)

Its initial design was to appease the suffering of French residents who, while fleeing sectarian persecution in France, settled in Geneva. It has been estimated that in a single decade alone (1550-60) some 60,000 refugees passed through Geneva, a number capable of producing significant social stress.

The deacons cared for a large range of needs, not wholly dissimilar to the strata of welfare needs in our own society. They provided interim subsidy and job training as needed; on occasion, they even provided the necessary tools or supplies so that an able-bodied person could engage in an honest vocation. Within a generation of this welfare work, Calvin's diaconate discovered the need to communicate to recipients the goal that they were to return to work as soon as possible. They also cared for cases of abandonment, supported the terminally ill who, in turn, left their children to be supported, and also included a ministry to widows who often had dependent children and a variety of needs.

Naturally there were theological peculiarities, and these theological distinctives led to certain practical commitments. Modern leaders might be better off to see what they can learn from the past; in summary, the following list illustrates principles of Calvin's influential welfare reform:

1. It was only for the truly disadvantaged.
2. Moral prerequisites accompanied assistance.
3. Private or religious charity, not state largesse, was the vehicle for aid.
4. Ordained officers managed and brought accountability.
5. Theological underpinnings were normal.
6. Productive work ethic was sought.
7. Assistance was temporary.
8. History is valuable.

One of Calvin's fellow Reformers, Martin Bucer, went so far as to say of the diaconate that "without it there can be no true communion of saints." (9) In a sermon on 1 Timothy 3:8-10, Calvin himself associated the early church's compassion as the measure of our Christianity: "If we want to be considered Christians and want it to be believed that there is some church among us, this organization must be demonstrated and maintained." On one occasion, Calvin rhetorically asserted, "Do we want to show that there is reformation among us? We must begin at this point, that is, there must be pastors who bear purely the doctrine of salvation, and then deacons who have the care of the poor."

- 1 [[Back](#)] The most recent history of the university recounts several abortive efforts, including one in 1420 under Roman Catholic authority and another in 1429 by Francois de Versonnex. See Marco Marcacci, *Historie de L'Universite de Geneve 1558-1986* (Geneva: University of Geneva, 1987), 17. For a pre-history of the Genevan Academy, see also William G. Naphy, "The Reformation and the Evolution of Geneva's Schools," Beat Kumin, ed., *Reformations Old and New* (London: Scholar Press, 1996), 190-93. Until recently, Charles Borgeaud's *Historie de l'Universite de Geneve* (Geneva, 1900) was the standard history.
- 2 [[Back](#)] E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), 112. The *schola privata* began classes in fall 1558 and the *schola publica* commenced in November 1558. Marcacci, 17.
- 3 [[Back](#)] Public records for January 17, 1558, refer to the establishment of the college with three chairs (theology, philosophy, Greek). Notice was also given commending the college as a worthy recipient of inheritance proceeds. See Henry Martyn Baird, *Theodore Beza* (1899), 104.
- 4 [[Back](#)] See Donald R. Kelley, *Francois Hotman: A Revolutionary's Ordeal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 270.
- 5 [[Back](#)] Baird, 106, 113.
- 6 [[Back](#)] See my summation in *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 2-4. I am indebted to Dr. James H. Hutson for this fascinating anecdote, which he presents in his *The Sister Republics: Switzerland and the United States from 1776 to the Present*, 2nd. ed. (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1992), 68-76.
- 7 [[Back](#)] Jeannine Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare: Deacons and the Bourse Française* (Cranbury, NJ: Susquehanna University Press), 11-12.
- 8 [[Back](#)] Cited by Geoffrey Bromiley, "The English Reformers and Diaconate," *Service in Christ* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 113.
- 9 [[Back](#)] Basil Hall, "Diaconia in Martin Butzer," *Service in Christ* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 94.

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