

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**

**July 5, 2009**

**Psalm 82**

***Happy Birthday, John Calvin***

If you wish to talk about life and faith, where do you start? You can focus on yourself and study all the marvelous intricacies of the human being, but that will not tell you much about what it means to be one human out of 6.5 billion currently living on earth. Or you can focus on God and seek to see the world as if looking down from heaven. But you will quickly discover that our minds are too small to grasp the complexity of such a perspective. John Calvin was right: All wisdom we possess consists of two things – what we know of ourselves and what we know of God. Therefore, thinking about life and faith involves a conscious dance between two points-of-view - what we know of God and what we know of ourselves, and joyfully exploring how the pieces from each of those sets of knowledge fit together to enable us to glimpse what life is all about.

For Calvin to come to this insight, I need to describe for you the rich and troubled decades that made up the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. When the year 1500 rolled around, Columbus had made his voyages to the New World, Copernicus was lecturing on astronomy, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were busy creating masterpieces. Gutenberg's printing press, about 50 years old by this point, was changing the way information was disseminated, thanks to over 1000 printing offices now in existence, producing by this point close to 10 million copies of all manner of books.

In 1507 at the age of 24, Martin Luther was ordained a priest and soon began teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg. In 1509, John Calvin was born in neighboring France; both men were destined to be intellectual and spiritual giants. Over the next decade, pamphlets were printed and sermons preached, all challenging the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Then in 1517, Luther focused the entire discussion with one hammer blow as he nailed his 95 Theses to the cathedral door in Wittenberg. The Reformation had begun. Within two years it spread to the south, to Switzerland, led in Zurich by the fiery preacher, Ulrich Zwingli. In 1520, Luther was excommunicated and the Protestant faith became official. By 1528 the Reformation had spread to Sweden and Scotland, and in 1531 an 18-year old named Henry VIII ascended the throne in England, soon to lead that nation away from Catholicism.

This was the world in which John Calvin grew up. Initially destined to be a priest, Calvin's father moved his precocious son over to the study of law. While Henry VIII ruled in England and Luther was busy translating the bible into German, Calvin converted from Catholicism to the Protestant faith and began writing himself. His principal work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was first published in 1536 and became the textbook of the Reformation.

So what is the central message of the Protestant Reformation? At the risk of a gross over-simplification, for centuries all questions of faith and scriptural interpretation were controlled by the church leaders – from the local priests up through the Pope in Rome.

The church “justified” people; that is to say, the church made people right with God through its process of giving or withholding the sacrament of Holy Communion. Martin Luther challenged this view by insisting that we are justified by faith, not through works or church acts such as confessing our sins, doing penance or attending Mass. It is not the church that gives us our identity as Christian believers; rather by grace through faith we receive our identity as members of the priesthood of all believers, and in response to God’s wonderful love, we express this common identity in the community of the church. That was Luther’s first step of the Reformation.

Calvin took the conversation one step further. If the issue is whether the church or the individual’s faith is what justifies us, the debate will stay too focused on us as individuals. So Calvin wrote: All knowledge consists of what we know of ourselves and what we know of God – and it makes sense to let God have the first word in this debate. Begin with the idea of the sovereignty of God, that God is the creator of all life, the ruler of all nations. Let everything that is be seen first in light of God. Every earthly power must be relativized in relation to the power of God who is sovereign over kings and kingdoms, mayors and the marketplace, and over popes, priests, preachers and all people of faith.

Suddenly the language of the Old Testament comes to life again. Deuteronomy 6: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the one Lord, whom you shall love with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.* In a world of false gods, of rival gods claiming to be the authority for our life, is spoken again the words of Psalms 82: *God takes God’s place in the divine council; in the midst of [other] gods, the Lord holds judgment... Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations belong to you!* No longer should we consider the world to be divided into neat compartments – our home life, our work life, our political life, and our spiritual life. No, all of it is under the one true God. That is why our Brief Statement of Faith begins, “In life and in death we belong to God whom alone we worship and serve.” It is an amazing, democratizing sentiment, the seeds of which went on to bear fruit in the American Revolution and the framing of democracy in this nation, which we celebrate this Fourth of July weekend.

How then shall we live, given our existence as children of a sovereign God, as people justified by faith through grace, as followers of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again that we might grasp the depth and richness of God’s love for us? How then shall we live? **1)** We acknowledge God as Lord of every hour of our life, every place we find ourselves in our life, and over every other authority we may encounter in this life. And we allow God to be that same God for every other being on earth. This perspective gives us the courage to fight for justice, to work for peace, to be outspoken politically, and to live in hope. For in this dance between self-knowledge and knowledge of our sovereign God emerges true wisdom.

**2)** We pray to God, because prayer is never simply an exercise in articulating our personal wishes or getting our thoughts in order by speaking them out loud. Prayer is a subversive activity, because it is an act of defiance against any false god and worldly power claiming to have authority over us. We open ourselves up to the sovereign, loving

God and pray for all aspects of our earthly life: pray for ourselves and our families; for our leaders and for peace; pray against war and disease and violence and fear – doing so to the one who alone is God, who rules in the highest heaven, and who offers healing and hope and a life that is stronger than death.<sup>1</sup>

**3)** We gather for communion. Because it is at this table the knowledge of self and of God come together. We share bread and juice, just as we eat other foods every day of our lives. Yet it is more than just simple elements. It is the sign and seal of what we believe. It is God come near to us so that we might ever and always be near to God. We taste this God; we experience this communion, individually and yet together. For such is the mystery of our faith, the dance of love and spirit that is at the heart of Christianity.

So happy 500<sup>th</sup> birthday, John Calvin. In closing, hear two verses from Calvin's best known hymn, "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art":

Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,  
Reigning omnipotent in every place;  
So come, O King, and our whole being sway;  
Shine on us with the light of Thy pure day.

Our hope is in no other save in Thee;  
Our faith is built upon Thy promise free;  
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,  
That in Thy strength we evermore endure.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eugene Peterson, The Contemplative Pastor, p. 17.