

Calvin, Calvinism, and Politics

This year marks the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth and evidence of the great Protestant Reformer's influence is all around us 500 years later.

The long-standing argument that modern capitalism and constitutional government owe a great debt to Calvin has not lost its force. Calvin's attempt to regain a biblical view of every sphere of life in God's creation and not only to reform ecclesiastical life is of great importance in this regard. Schools and universities founded by those whom he influenced proliferated wherever Calvinism took root. With other Reformers he insisted on the priesthood of all believers, whose relation to God was mediated by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and not via church officials. Hearing the word of God through careful study of the Bible was his ambition for every Christian, and he sought help from rabbis to master Hebrew in order to open the Old Testament again to Christian understanding. There is no end of the flow of new books exploring the continuing impact of Calvin and Calvinism on law, politics, the economy, and society, as well as on church doctrine, liturgy, and governance.*

Not discussed very much in the ongoing examination of Calvin and Calvinism, however, is the historical conjunction of the rise of the modern state, on the one hand, and the Calvinist identification of some of those states with ancient Israel, on the other. The most powerful example of this identification is the American founding, which was deeply influenced by Puritan thought. It's not that all early Americans were Puritans or that identifying a modern state as "new Israel" was inherent in Calvin's thought. But the connection was made in 1776 nonetheless, even if in a secularized way, and the

* To mention only a few recent examples there is John Witte, Jr.'s *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*; Philip Benedict's *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*; Mark Noll's *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*; and William R. Stevenson, Jr.'s *Sovereign Grace: The Place and Significance of Christian Freedom in John Calvin's Political Thought*. Calvin's influence especially on state formation and "individual agency" in Switzerland, The Netherlands, Scotland, England, and the United States is told in countless ways, as, for example, in James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society*; Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism, 1541-1715*; and Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics*. And one of the most intriguing recent collections of non-fiction essays that gives close attention to Calvin's influence on modern thought, particularly in America, is by the novelist Marilynne Robinson: *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. These few represent only the tip of the iceberg.

American nation itself, not a church body, was conceived as a new Israel, a new covenant people of God, called to be a light to all other nations, a model city on the hill. Something similar also happened among Calvinists in Scotland, England, The Netherlands, and among the Afrikaners in South Africa.

In a recent essay, “Reformed . . . and Always Reforming?” (forthcoming in a book edited by Sandra Joireman, *Church, State, and Citizen*, to be published by Oxford University Press), I argue that this biblically unfounded identification of a modern state as God’s “new Israel” is a danger that Calvinists should have confronted head on a long time ago. As the United States, for example, grew to become such a global superpower, its actions have often led to a misunderstanding of Christianity. The idea of America as God’s chosen vessel to lead the world to freedom and democracy was not an invention of George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan. President Woodrow Wilson, a Presbyterian who had been president of Princeton University (founded by Calvinists) wanted the League of Nations to be headquartered in Calvin’s Geneva and the league’s constitution to be called a “covenant”—all as witness to his American view of the world.

The emergence of a pattern of civil-religious nationalism in countries influenced by the Reformed tradition, should lead Calvinists, and Christians generally, to take a more critical look at a development that is closer to idolatry than to Christian reformation. The New Testament certainly does not support the idea that any political entity after the coming of Christ can be God’s new Israel, modeled after God’s chosen people of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.

Those who stand in the Reformed tradition (often called the Calvinist tradition) should recognize so-called “Christian” nationalism for the unbiblical idea or ideology that it is. Even many Americans who harbor no faith in God hold the belief that America is the world’s “exceptional nation,” the nation commissioned to lead history to its proper democratic, peaceful, and prosperous destiny. This is derived from the new-Israel idea. The dangers of overzealous hubris and self-aggrandizing foreign policies are all inherent in such civil-religious nationalism.

In this year of remembering John Calvin and reflecting on his influence, it would be good for citizens in those countries most influenced by Calvinism to reexamine their ideas of nation in relation to God. Going hand in hand with the Reformed tradition’s high regard for creation is its emphasis on government’s calling to do justice in humility and fear before God. There is no Reformed justification for governments to act out of a nationalistic or messianic motivation. The opposite is what we need today, namely, governments acting cooperatively insofar as possible to uphold laws of distributive and retributive justice for the good of the public commons—both the domestic commons within individual countries and the international commons shared by all nations.

James W. Skillen, President
Center for Public Justice