

WGUMC October 1, 2017 Colossians 1:15-20  
John Calvin and the Supremacy of Christ

For me, theology is like genealogy. Instead of researching where your people come from, theologians study where your beliefs come from. And they are just as likely to find some really interesting characters in your theological family tree. That's what got me to major in religious studies. I wanted to know, where did that belief come from? Where did we get that idea?

A lot of our ideas come from the Bible, of course, but plenty others come from Church history. Today, we are looking at one of the most influential figures in that history, though few of us know very much about him.

John Calvin was a second generation French reformer who was not as colorful a person as Martin Luther. If Luther was the doer, Calvin was the thinker. If Luther was the pastor, Calvin was the scholar. If Luther was a popular preacher, Calvin was the careful Bible interpreter. If Luther was a rule breaker, Calvin

was the strict administrator. Luther was focused on the Word of God. Calvin was even more obsessed with the will of God.

In fact, the sovereign will of God was at the very core of Calvin's teaching. Calvin wanted everyone to know that human beings are enslaved by sin, whereas God is totally free. So men and women think they have control over their fate, when in reality God has total control over everything.

But we can only know this if we know Christ, who is the visible image of the invisible God. As our text says today, God created all things in heaven and on earth through Christ and for Christ. Thrones, dominions, rulers—none of these things have any power or any freedom that doesn't come from God through Jesus Christ.

According to Calvin, what God wants to do, God does. Who God wants to choose, God chooses. Therefore, God is free to choose some people to be saved and others to be damned. This is the doctrine of double predestination, an idea that

Calvin got from St. Augustine who may or may not have held it. Nevertheless, Calvin and his followers ran with it. Now if you ask how a good God could choose to damn someone to hell even before they are born, Calvin would say, it is a mystery. I say, it is just plain scary.

So the idea of predestination isn't that popular these days. Yet plenty of Christians follow Calvin anyway when it comes to trying to understand the will of God. Why did the hurricane hit Houston? Why did the earthquake strike Mexico City? A strict Calvinist would say that since everything happens according to God's will, even bad things must come from God. So God must be punishing those poor people for something. For example, when Hurricane Sandy hit New York, some said it was punishment for the city's gay-friendly policies. So it's interesting that they were pretty quiet when Harvey hit Houston.

The willingness to make God the cause of death and destruction is part of the legacy of Calvinism. But it isn't the only dilemma that Calvin passes down to us. More so than Martin Luther, Calvin tried to address the political problems that arose as the Reformation began to take hold.

In the Middle Ages, the Christian Church didn't have a clearly-defined relationship with the State. That's because the Catholic Church thought it was the State. But not everyone agreed, and there were constant power struggles between popes and princes down through the ages. Now when the Reformers left the Catholic Church, they were still left with the question of how they were going to divvy up the power.

This is where Calvin's legal training came in handy. He was essentially hired by the leading men of Geneva to figure out how the Reform was going to function in that city. First of all, Calvin thought the church should be governed democratically.

So he created a body, called a consistory, which was made up of all the pastors and a dozen elected lay elders.

In Calvin's plan there was a clear distinction of duties. The city council attended to civil affairs and the consistory was in charge of spiritual affairs. Neither group was to rule over the other and both groups were ruled by God. In this way, Calvin laid down the rationale for the separation of Church and State.

And his ideas about government spread wherever the Reformation spread. The Puritans brought them to the New World. Since then, our problem has always been in keeping the power of the Church and State in balance and in check. It hasn't been easy.

The Puritans had pious plans to build a New Jerusalem, but they got busy branding adulterers, banishing heretics, and burning women for being witches. Likewise, the founding fathers had lofty ideals about democracy. They had a conviction that all men are created equal and endowed by their

Creator with certain inalienable rights, but they never intended for slaves or women or even poor white men to vote.

Despite Calvin's best efforts, his descendants have not been able to make society look like the kingdom of God. But we keep trying. We just have to remember what Calvin said about power. We have to remind every pastor and every politician to be careful, because all power comes from God and all people who are in a position to use that power will be held to account by God.

In fact, it was Calvin's insistence on the total sovereignty of God and the supreme lordship of Christ that gave one Reformed theologian by the name of Karl Barth the strength and courage to stand up to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.

When Hitler first came to power in Germany, he pressured the churches to support his racist ideology. Christians who were pro-Nazi thought that Hitler was a German prophet and that his vision for a purified Germany was a revelation from God.

Whether or not they agreed, most German church leaders bowed to political reality, but a few resisted.

At great risk to their lives, they called themselves the Confessing Church, and Karl Barth was one of their leaders. He wrote a declaration that said that there is no revelation of God outside of the Bible and there is no leader, no Führer, other than the Lord, Jesus Christ. When he refused to pledge an oath of allegiance to Hitler, Barth was forced to leave Germany. When he returned after the war, he led the movement for repentance and reconciliation in his home country.

Considering how most Christians in German caved to the Nazis, I am grateful that the light of Christ managed to shine through the witness of Karl Barth in a very dark place at a very evil time. In many ways, we are living in an evil time, too. Every day, false prophets proclaim fake news. As Charlottesville proved to us, Nazi ideology is alive and well today. Fascism, totalitarianism, and homegrown terrorism—these are all still

with us. If we spend any time thinking about it, we start to feel hopeless.

John Calvin and Karl Barth tell us: Hold on. We are not without hope. Remember who is in charge. Remember that all things were created through Christ and all things were created for Christ and all things hold together in Christ. We just have to hold together and hold onto the faith that one day we will be able to see that what is going on right now, as awful and hurtful and sinful as it may be, has already been reconciled to God through Christ by the peace of his cross. The victory over evil has already been won. Our biggest challenge today is to embody that truth, to live in the reality of our reconciliation with God, and to help others hold on until the one who came first comes at last. Come, Lord Jesus!