

The Influence of Calvin in My Life

By adminlen On September 9, 2011 · Add Comment

One night about thirty years ago, John Calvin came to me in a dream. I seemed to be standing on a bridge, trying to decide which way to go in my life. He told me in a stern voice that I was to be a minister, and that if I refused I would be judged! I remember dropping to my knees and crying out for mercy as he faded away, and then I....

OK, I'm kidding. I never had a dream like that, especially not with Calvin. In fact, when the Lord called me into the ministry 30 years ago I'd never read the *Institutes*, and really had no clue about the details of Calvin's life and ministry beyond the bare outline of Reformed history with which I had grown up, and then been away from for several years when we moved away from our BP church in San Bernardino, California. I used his commentaries a little in high school, and found them very helpful, but I've had no big "Ah Hah!" course-correction moments in my life



where I was headed for an Arminian worldview but was diverted by reading a Calvin sermon, tract, or treatise.

This isn't very exciting, but the reality is that Calvin didn't change my life in some dramatic fashion that will thrill you as I recount the tale. What really happened is that Calvin's thought and theology were the foundation of my life and worldview without a lot of fanfare and fuss, and without me really comprehending it until much later in my life and ministry.

I grew up under the quiet, thorough, and loving gospel ministry of Rev. John Janbaz in San Bernardino. My parents were both saved under his ministry when I was about a year old. Our home was changed from a secular place to a place where the Lord reigned. Our knowledge of God and of ourselves was shaped into the Reformed mold as God's Word was preached in a covenantal framework that cherished the doctrines of grace. I do not remember ever thinking that I had something worthwhile to offer God for either my salvation or ongoing acceptance. I knew I was fallen and that only the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus could redeem me, only his Spirit could sanctify me, and only his intercession could maintain my communion with my heavenly Father.

But all of this head knowledge was not enough, and I began to wander from my faith as a teenager. It had been a few years since we left San Bernardino, and I had been sitting under the preaching of another faithful servant of God, Rev. Harold Anderson, in Murphy, Oregon. Though congregational in ecclesiology, he was thoroughly Reformed in his soteriology and understanding of sanctification. His fervent and simple preaching on the sovereignty of God and his holiness hammered at my wayward heart. Outward reform took place, and then, real transformation one night as I sat under the preaching of yet another man (whose name I cannot remember – he was a traveling evangelist preaching at another church for some revival meetings) and heard once again the old, old story of the holiness of an offended God, the necessity of crying out for mercy in Jesus' name, and really trusting what Christ had already finished. The Holy Spirit regenerated me that night, and I cried out for mercy to my Savior. I have to say that is pretty exciting after all! I was a new creature by God's grace...and I knew it was God's grace, not my decision. My whole life and mindset had been prepared to understand my salvation as the product of sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli Deo gloria. There was Calvin again in the background, though I didn't think about it at the time.

Since then, I've read a few more books, including the *Institutes*! My Reformed worldview was challenged and strengthened through my college training. Again, nothing too exciting here, just the blessing of being undergirded by faith in God's sovereignty and providence that was never disappointed. I wish I could say that after my conversion my life was the epitome of righteousness, but it was not. The process of sanctification had begun, but as a lump of clay I was pretty worthless to begin with. The point is, though, that due to the theology that was ingrained in me, I recognized God's hand in sanctification, understood forgiveness and acceptance with God from a Calvinistic point of view, and did not find it hard to reject a legalistic approach to "being right with God." Though I was surrounded by fervent adherents to another theological tradition, Calvin stood me in good stead, and gave me good, biblical answers I needed when confronted by the passionate and sometimes scholarly attempts to convert me to another way of thinking. When I was called to preach, I understood that call from a Reformed standpoint, though as I look back I do not recall stopping to analyze it as such at the time.

When I graduated from college, my parents gave me a set of Calvin's *Commentaries*. They were the first set of commentaries that I had ever possessed, and they have proved to be the best I have ever possessed. Lugging them from place to place was always worth the effort, and they enriched my studies and my sermons as I grew in the ministry. Grad school, seminary, doctoral studies, daily ministry – Calvin had something to say in all of it because he in turn adhered closely to the thought of the Apostles. Of course, along the way there were other books, too. But the ones that have been the most helpful have been the ones written by the hands of men who were themselves touched deeply by the biblical perspectives from which Calvin thought and taught. Consequently, my library has been shrinking through the years as I've given away or sold less useful books.

When faced with big decisions in life, I've never wondered if God was moving and directing according to his sovereign will. It has always seemed obvious. When my wife was diagnosed with cancer, both of us were able to rejoice through that sometimes frightening experience because our biblical theology was informed by Calvin. We knew that God was in charge, that his perfect will was being done, and that we were the better for it even if we didn't understand all the whys and wherefores. When my father was diagnosed with cancer, that theology was proven yet again. About the same time, God led us to adopt our son, Eli, through amazing circumstances and gracious provision. Eli caught some of Calvin's worldview even as he began to learn English and wonder about the new world in which he found himself. When my dad died, Eli was intensely curious about where he had gone, and often asked about it. On one occasion, he asked how we knew Grandfather was with Jesus. When we answered that it was because Grandfather loved Jesus, Eli pondered for a moment and then observed, "Yes, but Jesus had to love him first." Calvin's thought had captured another heart, and encouraged mine all over again in the process.

Now, my set of *Commentaries* has found a new home at a Bible college in Africa that needed good books for their students, and I've got a much lighter electronic copy! I'm teaching biblical doctrine to my children in the same fashion that Calvin did in the confidence that his Spirit-guided wisdom will have the same depth of impact upon their lives as it has had upon mine. Calvin's commitment to educating the next generation is being passed on, and now he's impacting my life by keeping it busy trying to keep up with lesson plans! His worldview is my worldview, and is the fabric of every part of my life and ministry. So, no big story here, no big dramatic experience – just a life blessed by the confidence that God is mine, that he is sovereignly and lovingly in control of all things, and that my soul is safe in the salvation he secured for me through the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ. All praise to God.