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Grace and Controversy

Mark 5:17

We live in a world that demands simple answers and convenient categories. Jesus runs afoul of this truism in the 5th chapter of Mark. After making a stormy crossing of the Sea of Galilee Jesus and his disciples arrive on the Gentile side of the lake. At once they are confronted with a crisis. They are met by a demented man who has lived among the tombs. This man was so out of control and so violent that people had given up trying to help him. They had labeled him the demoniac and banished him to live alone in the cemetery outside of the town. There he lived a self-destructive life inflicting terrible wounds upon himself. The tormented man stayed in his place and the townspeople did not have to deal with him.

When Jesus gets out of the boat this homeless man approaches. Jesus has compassion on the man and commands the evil spirit to come out of him. The life of the tormented man is radically transformed. When the townspeople come and see the man they have demonized and banished from the community looking perfectly healthy and conversing with Jesus they are afraid. The healing grace that Jesus has brought to them has disrupted the convenient categories by which they have always lived. They are not prepared to receive into their community the one they have so thoroughly demonized and excluded. They respond to Jesus' ministry by begging him to leave their neighborhood.

This is the kind of controversy which Jesus faces throughout his ministry. He is always crossing the conventional boundaries to respond to human need. The grace he brings is a threat to those who cling to their simple answers and convenient categories.

This issue is raised in a very interesting way in the publicity surrounding the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth on July 9. In our culture Calvin has become a symbol of intolerance and oppression. Everyone "knows" that Calvin was a dictator who was at least misguided if not evil. This conventional wisdom of our era was aptly expressed in a recent interview by Krista Tippett on her NPR program, "Speaking of Faith." She was visiting with an Iranian-American professor named Vali Nasr about the nature of the theocratic government that rules Iran today. That interview includes this exchange:

Mr. Nasr: It's not as if Martin Luther or Calvin actually set out to create modernity as we know it.

Ms. Tippett: No.

Mr. Nasr: In fact, Calvin's Geneva was a horrible place.

Ms. Tippett: Yes.

Mr. Nasr: In many ways it's much more like the Taliban state that we so fear.

Ms. Tippett: Yes, a theocracy.

Mr. Nasr: A theocracy of the worst kind.

("The Sunni-Shia Divide and the Future of Islam," Transcript of Radio Program, May 21, 2009, pages 2-3)

I was listening to this exchange at 7:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning. I was putting on my tie in preparation for going downstairs for breakfast. My wife, Barbara, was sleeping peacefully until she was rudely awakened by the sound of an "expletive deleted." Mr. Nasr may not know his Reformation history, but he certainly knows his American audience. His characterization of Calvin and 16th century Geneva is not likely to be challenged on any major university campus in Europe or America today. The notion of Calvin as the dictator of Geneva is so ingrained in our culture no one bothers to question it.

For the first 25 years of my ministry I assumed that a notion that is so well imbedded in our culture must have some historical basis. It seemed unfortunate that someone who wrote so lucidly about the meaning of Scripture and had such good ideas about organizing the church along democratic lines was so power hungry and intolerant. For a long time I simply avoided the issue of who Calvin really was. But over the past eight years I have made a concentrated effort to learn the truth about Calvin. While some questions are certainly open for debate it is abundantly clear that there is no historical basis for the common perception of Calvin as the "dictator of Geneva." For centuries the city of Geneva was run by a dictator, the Catholic Bishop of Geneva. When the bishop was forced out just before the Reformation, power was assumed by the city council. Calvin was not a dictator but an employee of the city council. The city council sometimes supported Calvin's recommendations and sometimes vetoed what Calvin wanted to do. When Calvin was most influential it was because the people in the pews were moved by his preaching and brought pressure to bear on the city fathers to do what he proposed. Not many of us would call that "dictatorship." We usually call it democracy in action.

So why has Calvin been so thoroughly demonized? Calvin was a brilliant scholar and talented preacher who lived simply, but he was not perfect. He was a fighter in the rough and tumble politics of Geneva. He was not always gracious to his critics. He sometimes had problems controlling his temper and sought God's forgiveness for that. There is room for criticism of Calvin's theology and reforms, but this does not account for the degree to which he has been demonized in our culture.

The demonization of Calvin began to take hold with biographies of Calvin sponsored by the Jesuits. The Jesuit order was leading the reinvention of the Catholic Church which almost collapsed during the Reformation. They correctly perceived Calvin to be their greatest threat because of the popularity of his writings with the common people. They set out to damage Calvin with biographies that made all kinds of outlandish and baseless charges against him. Most of those charges were soon forgotten, but the one that stuck was Calvin as the evil dictator of Geneva. Later Calvin's writings became popular in Germany and some German principalities became Calvinist rather than Lutheran. Worried Lutheran leaders noticed that the bogus biographies had worked well for the Jesuits so why not for them. In the 17th century the myth of Calvin as the evil dictator was useful to the high church Anglican party in England which wanted to isolate the Puritan followers of Calvin. In the 20th century secular intellectuals have found this myth about Calvin useful for their attack on religion generally.

Peeling back all of these layers of negative propaganda to get to the real Calvin is no easy task, especially for those who prefer simple answers and convenient categories. Some of you saw the Associated Press article that ran in the *State Journal-Register* about a week ago. The writer attended an academic conference in Geneva where he learned to his surprise that Calvin supported the arts, encouraged people to help the poor, promoted democracy, and planted the seeds of capitalism. But he could not bring himself to write about Calvin without tipping his hat to the convenient categories of our culture. Without citing sources or examples, he begins the article with "John Calvin, the Great Reformer, used dictatorial means in making Geneva the Protestant Rome (Hanns Neuerbourg, The Associated Press, *State Journal-Register*, June 20, 2009)." I predict that we will see a lot more of that

kind of so-called "balanced" media coverage as the 500th anniversary date approaches. If you see coverage that does not play to the myth of the "great dictator" please let me know. That would be a truly surprising development.

In the first chapter of 2 Samuel a messenger comes to David with the news of the death of King Saul. The messenger believes that he is bringing wonderful news to David. He knew that Saul's madness and envy had kept David on the run for years. Saul had banished David from the court and forced him to live as a fugitive. Now the way is open for David to assume the throne. David is set free to fulfill his ambition. The man the messenger believes to be the "evil dictator" is dead. But David does not respond in the way the messenger expects. He does not celebrate Saul's death, he grieves for Saul. David refuses to accept any label for Saul that demonizes his former friend. David has learned that our simple answers and convenient categories have no standing in God's kingdom of grace.

Those seeking a historically accurate and balanced assessment of John Calvin's life, theology, and legacy may find the following bibliography helpful:

McGrath, Alister E., *A Life of John Calvin*, Blackwell Publishers, 1990.

McNeill, John T., *The History and Character of Calvinism*, Oxford University Press, 1954.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *The Reformation*, Penguin Books, 2003.

Parker, T. H. L., *John Calvin: A Biography*, Westminster Press, 1975.

Smylie, James H. *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, Geneva Press, 1996.