

Editorial: John Calvin: Reflecting upon One of God's Gifts to the Church

Stephen J. Wellum

IN EPH 4:1-16, the apostle Paul, after exhorting the church to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and after reminding her of the oneness of Christ's body brought about by the sovereign Triune work of God in salvation, beautifully goes on to describe that part of the

Lord's victorious work was to pour out gifted leaders to the church for her growth and edification. As our Lord accomplished our redemption in his glorious cross-work, resurrection, and ascension, he not only poured out the Holy Spirit for us at Pentecost, he also gave to the church various leaders in order "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer

be children, tossed to and fro by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (vv. 12-14, ESV). This text, along with many more throughout the New Testament, establishes the importance of Christian leaders for the church—leaders who are nothing less than gifts of the risen, exalted Christ—for the good and benefit of the people of God. Here we have the beautiful balance between the entire people of God as those who know the Lord, who have direct access to him through Christ, and who are all gifted by the Spirit for works of service due to the inauguration of the new covenant, and the important role that God-ordained and called leaders play within the church. Even within the church where the entire covenant community is regenerate, gifted, and empowered by the Spirit, there is still a unique role for pastors, teachers, and leaders. In fact, without them, the church would be impoverished and unable to grow to full maturity in Jesus Christ our Lord.

When we think of such gifts, certainly we ought

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to think of our present leaders—pastors, teachers, and so on—in our local churches. But it is also important that we do not limit our thoughts only to the present time. There is a real sense in which we should view godly leaders from church history, not merely as gifts from our Lord for their time and place, but also as gifts for us today as we stand on their shoulders, read their writings, and learn from their example. Leaders from the past provide for us role models to follow and emulate as we seek to learn from them, both positively and negatively. This is one of the reasons why the study of historical figures is so important. They help teach us how to think through so many important matters both doctrinally and personally, and our study of their lives, theology, and service challenges us afresh to live for our Lord in our day and age. No doubt, no human example ever takes the place of our constant dependence upon the Lord and our looking to him. The author to the Hebrews reminds us that we are to run with endurance the race that is set before us, “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2, ESV). But in this same context, the author also reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses from the past, which also serve as encouragement for us on how to run the race with perseverance and how to live for the Lord today in light of their past example.

With all of this in mind, it is always a privilege to focus our attention on key Christian leaders from the past. To think through their lives and teaching, how they endured hardship for Christ, and how they faithfully served the people of God and sought to carry out the Great Commission in their time and place. The only problem is who to choose to focus on, given the fact that there are numerous examples of past Christian leaders who deserve our time and attention. In previous issues of *SBJT*, we have made various attempts to focus on a variety of historical periods and people and in the future we will continue to do so. But as 2009 has come and gone, we would be remiss not to focus on one important Christian leader from the past—a leader who was born 500 years ago,

who has been remembered this year in a variety of conferences around the world and in the publication of numerous volumes reflecting upon his life and thought—namely, the life and theology of the great Reformer, John Calvin.

It is hardly an overstatement to say that Calvin’s influence upon the church and upon the world has been enormous. Many consider him as probably the greatest of the Reformers of the sixteenth century, and that is quite a statement in itself. His writings are prolific, his commentaries on every book of the Bible except the book of Revelation are still read today, and his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* has shaped the minds and hearts of the church since it was penned. His work in theology and biblical exegesis is still hard to match, and his influence upon Western society is incalculable. But in addition to that, he has taught us how to serve as a faithful pastor and preacher and servant of the gospel. It is certainly worthwhile on the quincentennial of his birth to reflect upon one of Christ’s great gifts to his church and to learn from him and to be challenged anew to be God-centered in our lives, Christ-glorifying in our preaching and teaching, and to desire above all else to live for and to model to others what it means to live under the authority of Scripture for God’s glory in the face of Christ. It is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will serve to do just this, which, after all, would be the greatest tribute we could pay to him.