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Today's Reading of Calvin's Theology

Hermeneutical Difficulties Deriving From the Differences and Similarities of Times*

According to English historian and philosopher of history, Arnold Toynbee, “what happened once will... remain unchanged. But it will always appear to be different to us because our point of view will always change.¹ And this position is the only one from which we can look back on the past.” This statement is certainly applicable to Calvin's Jubilee as well. Calvin's work – apart from perhaps the newly discovered manuscripts – can be taken as unchanged. His legacy (diverse in genre and vast in expanse), including his sole extant poem written in Latin,² his commentaries, his sermons, his extensive correspondence and up to the 1559 edition of *The Institutes*, is indeed our unchanged historical inheritance. The only question then is, in what ways does it look different in 2009 from what is looked like, say, a 100 years ago? That is, how have today's theologians', historians', economists' or politicians' respective points of view on Calvin's lifework been modified? Put in another way, it is possible for us to attempt to speak about Calvin's hermeneutics in the sense of an objective genitive; i. e. thinking about the modern hermeneutical problems of reading, citing and applying Calvin's writings themselves?

We gain some encouragement precisely from the so called “new literary hermeneutics”. While earlier interpretations focused on understanding the original intention of the author, the new hermeneutics has drifted to the other extreme, now the meaning of the text is independent of the author. As said by the radical historical approach, “the meaning in the text is changing from era to era, and psychologically, from reading to reading” – declares E. D. Hirsch.³ Without the intention of uncritically applying this extremely radical and subjectivist concept of the autonomy of the text to the interpretation of Calvin's works, we certainly have to acknowledge that we are unable to read Calvin without the influence of Calvinism. Here, however, “in defence of the author”, we shall always need to be able to make a clear distinction between the original intention and message of the texts, and the interpretations later attributed to them, as well as their independent historical effects. Apparently research on Calvin has just recently discovered the importance of this distinction. The diversity of Calvin's interpretation is as much a treasure as

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¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, “Was heisst geschichtlich denken?” in *Institut für europäische Geschichte, Mainz*; Vorträge No 28 (GMGH-Wiesbaden: Fr. Steiner VI, 1960).

² The poem “Epinicion” is first time translated and published in Hungarian by Sándor Békési. In Békési Sándor, ed., *Pius efficit ardor* (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 2009), 57–66.

³ E. D. Hirsch, “A szerző védelmében” in *A hermeneutika elmélete, 2. rész. Ikonológia és Műértelmezés 3.* (Szeged, 1987), 411.

a burden. Nevertheless, the jubilee clearly shows worldwide that Calvin can be considered as a living source even today, whose thoughts it is worthwhile for us to be in dialogue. The fact that the Reformed Church in Hungary has published a volume with the title *Calvin's Relevance* only proves this.⁴

But how much is it possible for a lifework written centuries ago to be relevant to the twenty-first century reader?

1. Let us first examine this question in the context of Calvin's socio-ethical teaching. His view on caring for the poor and the refugees, so different from the medieval model, is a startling example for us, even to this day.⁵ Obviously this issue has special relevance for us during this period when Europe's social network is being shredded, both in relation with church diacony, and with the social responsibility of the state. Of course, also in this case, we are not to read Calvin as a model to be reproduced. In contrast, we should be considering his perspective, far ahead of his own time, as he "exceeds the merely individual-ethical dimension (i.e. rich-poor) of handling the problem, and draws attention to the *social dimension* of eradicating poverty."⁶

To be sure, it is also necessary to correct the notion (advocated by Troeltsch and Max Weber) according to which Calvin is the intellectual father of Western capitalism.⁷ It is certainly debateable whether there is any direct theological connection between the certainty manifested in the fruits of the Christian life (*certitudo*),⁸ and the verification of election which is visible in riches.⁹ Granted, the conclusions of sociologists of religion in the last century were undoubtedly on the right track when they researched why countries under the influence of Calvin's theology have such a different economic and political life from the Catholic ones. Troeltsch and Weber were doing exegesis not so much on Calvin, as on the history of his effect unfolding in the Puritan-movement and its influence on the formation of American society. This is immediately noticeable from the number of the references they use. Calvin's teaching on predestination is just a secondary source behind Baxter and Benjamin Franklin. [And Franklin was certainly neither a Puritan nor a Calvinist] We must also see that the idea of election has always made people susceptible to exclusive elitism ever since the times of the Old Testament.¹⁰ Calvin's theology, therefore, cannot be blamed for such distortions of the Reformed tradition, just as the OT tradition of election cannot be blamed for nationalistic pride appearing in Israel from time to time.

Another similarly intriguing question is the relation between Calvin's theology and civil democracies in the West. Ebenhard Busch points out that, yet again, there are two conflicting interpretation co-existing.¹¹ One – and this is perfectly justified – highlights

⁴ Fazakas Sándor, ed., *Kálvin időszerezése, Tanulmányok Kálvin János teológiájának maradandó értékéről és magyarországi hatásáról* (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 2009).

⁵ Fazakas Sándor, "Kálvin szociáletikája", in *Kálvin időszerezése*, 124–129.

⁶ Fazakas Sándor: *op. cit.* 127.

⁷ *Ibid.* 112–116.

⁸ *Institutio* III. 6,3–5.

⁹ Max Weber, *A protestáns etika és a kapitalizmus szelleme* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1982), 99 and 154–157.

¹⁰ See the interpretation of The Book of Ruth as a correction of the purification of the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. A. S. Herbert, "Ruth", in M. Black – H. H. Rowley, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 316.

¹¹ Eberhard Busch, *Istenismeret és emberség. Betekintés Kálvin teológiájába* (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó 2009), 141–142.

Calvin's criticism on democracy, which, in unison with Plato, he called the reign of the mobs.¹² The other reading, however, maintains that he did accept a kind of conservative democracy, "moderated by the aristocracy".¹³ Apparently history opted for the latter reading, since civil democracy prevailed precisely in those countries where Calvinism had a significant role. No doubt, the Calvinistic bottom-up type of church model also contributed to this – although it would be a mistake to equate it with democracy as such. Yet we should see that there is openness in this direction in Calvin's theology.¹⁴ On the one hand, we have the fact that he did not link the Biblical understanding of power to any one form of government; on the other hand, exactly because of the sinful nature of man, he didn't agree with letting power come down in one hand.¹⁵ This theological principal was in harmony with Montesquieu's later theory of separation of powers.

Nevertheless it was precisely the openness of Calvin's theology that made it possible to have several historical readings of the magisterial resistance. It is customary to draw attention to the similarity between the *clause of resistance* in the Golden Bill and the above teaching of Calvin.¹⁶ The Hungarian reading, however, with the addition of a 'providential liberator' allows even the justification of revolution. This is analogous to the struggle against the apartheid in South Africa where the point of reference was the hugenottes'. Yet the negative experiences of the French Revolution led the historical Calvinism of the early 1900s to construct the theology and policy of *antirevolution*. Here the point of reference was the Calvinian stand against anarchy.¹⁷ Behind this we find the Western European experience that it is indeed possible to put right the incidental distortions of the state democratically and lawfully.¹⁸ Obviously these mechanisms turned out to be useless when it came to doing away with twentieth century dictatorships.¹⁹

Although one could make an analogy between Calvin's persecuted readers in sixteenth century France and those living under dictatorship, we should still notice the sober realism in his advice: "the conclusion of this debate, too, depends on the circumstances".²⁰ It is therefore, not the specific position he embraced regarding a certain issue that we should take into consideration, rather his higher theological vantage point from which he saw history as something in God's hands – no matter the circumstances. "Calvin was, first and foremost, a theologian, not a politician" – observes E. Busch.²¹ It is advisable then to take this seriously when interpreting either his political or economic comments.

¹² *Institutio* IV. 20,1.

¹³ Busch: *op. cit.* 141.

¹⁴ Révész Imre, "Presbiteri rendszerű-e a Magyar Református Egyház?" In: *Confessio* 2007/3, 23ff.

¹⁵ Vö. Szűcs Ferenc, "Kálvin felfogása a hatalomról és államról" in *Jogtörténeti Szemle* 2007/4, 2.; *Institutio* IV. 20,8.

¹⁶ Benda Kálmán, *A nemzeti bivatástudat nyomában* (Budapest: KRE Hittudományi Kar 2004), 53.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *A kálvinizmus lényege* (Budapest: Bethlen Gábor Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részv.-Társ.), 1922. Dr. Tóth Kálmán, "Kálvin és a korai kálvinizmus az engedelmségről és ellenállásról", in Dr. Ladányi Sándor (ed.), *Emlékkönyv Sebestyén Jenő születésének 100. évfordulóján* Budapest: A Református Egyház Zsinati Irodájának Sajtó Osztálya, 1986), 211–229.

¹⁸ *Institutio* IV. 20,5.

¹⁹ Cf. Abraham Akroong, "The Reformed Tradition Confronting the Situations of Violence in the African Society", in Dirk van Keulen – Martien E. Brinkman eds., *Christian Faith and Violence* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005), 106–121.

²⁰ *Institutio* IV. 20,8.

²¹ Busch, E.: *op. cit.* 143.

Also when it comes to Calvin's economy-ethics it is essential to remember that, be it the ethics of differential interest, or the relation between possession and common wealth, he took his stand not as an economist but primarily as a preacher and expositor of the Scriptures. It is noteworthy that even in explaining why the OT forbids taking interest he wants to interpret the spirit, not the letter of the law. So, on the one hand, he views it as the protector of the poor, on the other hand, as the success of the principle of common wealth and justice.²² In other words, in relation to our neighbour, he subordinated it partly to the Golden Rule, and partly to the effect of production loan on common wealth. Commercial bank loans, therefore, can by no means be justified by citing Calvin.²³

2. There is an even starker distinction between the understanding of law, order and church discipline of Calvin's time, and the situation of churches in liberal societies. Is there a point of contact at all for our church situation and Calvin's, with half a millennium of time separating us?²⁴ A conservative reading maintains that Calvin's battle with the libertines in Geneva and the present state of affairs of churches living in the context of postmodern individualism and liberalism allows us to answer in the affirmative. It is, beyond doubt, this difference of opinion that lies behind splits and theological controversies among Reformed churches. Time and again there is criticism of the people's church body saying: she is not Calvinist enough! This urge to "go back to Calvin" often manifests itself in prohibiting the ordination of female ministers and elders, legalistic church discipline and the practice of forbidding people to take communion.

In the 1970s, in the debate about ordination of women, even such an outstanding expert on Calvin as Andor Békési used the following argument: female ordination is not permissible because, in Calvin's understanding, pastoral office is not the subject of universal priesthood (as in Lutheran theology) but the paternity of the church. Even though this is formally true, the author completely ignored the fact that (in his interpretation of the charismata and offices) Calvin followed the pragmatic hermeneutic that did not intend to slavishly copy the model of any one NT church. For this reason, those who referred to other NT analogies were able to argue *for* female ordination just as powerfully.

In the same way, all comparisons that are trying to project the patterns of Calvin's Geneva onto a post-Christian, postmodern church are in danger of becoming anachronistic. Today we are being confronted with a painful experience: with the disintegration of the parish church model, the abyss between church and society is widening. As a result, the autonomy of the various sectors of society leaves no room for any influence on the church's part. She has lost all her weight in public opinion, and consequently her prophetic voice has become weak.²⁵ Unless by prophetic voice we mean the "voice of one calling in the desert" which we are bound to sound, whether heard or not.

Nor is it crystal clear if those advocators of Calvinistic church discipline who would only emphasise the difference of the church are indeed aware that, according to Troeltsch's typology, sociologically they have moved away from a church to the direc-

²² Christoph Stückelberger, *Ethischer Welthandel* (Bern: Verlag Paul Haupt 2001), 170.

²³ L. F. Schulze, "Calvin on Interest and Property – Some Aspects of his Socio-Economic View", in *Our Reformational Tradition* (Potchefstroom, Transvaal, Republic of South Africa: Potchefstroom University 1984), 217–228.

²⁴ Békési Andor: *Ordo, ordinatio* (manuscript).

²⁵ Gerard Dekker, "Lehetséges-e a református hit a (poszt)modern társadalomban?" in *Confessio* 2003/3.

tion of a cult. Unfortunately, it is possible to end up in a blind alley of this kind, if we apply such a strict interpretation on Calvin. However, in such cases, we also have to ask: have Calvin's thoughts about the unity of the visible church been taken just as seriously as the hallmarks of the "true church"? The latter is of course differentiated from the cult-like ideal of a pure and perfect church! Calvin, together with Augustine, was against this notion because he made a distinction between the church's visible and spiritual reality.²⁶

Obviously, when it comes to pluralism within the church one must tackle borderline issues which will determine what is acceptable in the Reformed church. Strictly taken, this is also the question of Calvin's interpretation today. William Weston sets up three categories in the American Presbyterian Church, which, typologically, are mostly applicable to the Hungarian Reformed Church as well. He is talking about a smaller liberal wing, a slightly larger conservative wing, and a large, central, loyalist group. According to Weston the two peripheral wings are not fighting so much *against* each other, as *for* the group in the middle.²⁷ The only areas where this battle is more moderate in the Hungarian scene are such dividing theological and ethical issues as feminist language in the liturgy and the view of homosexuality. In both cases it is our position, for the time being, that is more fortunate than that of our American brothers and sisters. On the one hand, because our language does not identify gender in grammar; on the other hand, because Hungarian society's sexual-ethical orientation is generally more conservative than in the West, therefore there is no pressure on the churches from the outside. On the contrary, public opinion rather expects Christian churches to protect the traditional conduct of life.

This idea of order is certainly emphatic in Calvin's theology. It can be found, partly, in his teaching about common grace, but also, quite surprisingly, in the exposition of the work of the Holy Spirit, who creates and sustains order at the same time.²⁸ Calvin purposefully stepped out of the boundaries of the church, also when he noticed in developing sciences the fact that "God wanted to support us through the work and service of the unbelievers". Therefore we should perceive these findings as gifts from God and we should use them gratefully. His worldview is still valid inasmuch as, albeit he differentiated them, he did not allow the separation of the world of nature and the world of grace.²⁹ The order by which God is ruling over this world is, in fact, the forerunner of the order of the Kingdom of God which will restore everything. By this, even the *usus legis politicus* is put in light of the final goal.³⁰ This is why the order or disorder of the world is never indifferent for faith. Yet precisely because they existed as a minority, Calvinists also learnt from their history that the triumph of justice is not dependent on numerical factors – according to Jesus' metaphors about salt and light. Preservation of the identity of faith and morality is efficacious even when it is radically different from the majority's ethical norms, and even when it is not hailed by the masses. The twentieth

²⁶ Szűcs Ferenc, "Exegézis és a dogmatika kapcsolata Kálvinnál a predestinációtan és az ekklesiológia tükrében", in Fazakas Sándor ed., *Kálvin időszereplése* (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó 2009), 101–103.

²⁷ William B. Weston, "Mi az elfogadható ma az Amerikai Presbiteriánus Egyházban?" in *Confessio*, 2003/3.

²⁸ Békési Andor, "Kálvin a Szentlélek teológusa", in Galsi Árpád ed., *Evangeliumi kálvinizmus* (Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadó 2009), 39–40.

²⁹ *Institutio* II, 2,16.

³⁰ I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Allison Park – Penn: Pickwick Publications 1992), 247–251.

century paradox of “ascetics in the world” was probably best represented by the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as he formed the ethics of “neither hating the world, nor becoming secularised”.³¹

As far as Calvinistic church discipline is concerned, it is worth noting that however important he considered it – unlike many of his followers –, he did not deem it among the *notae ecclesiae*.³² Modern practical theology is definitely on the right track when it scrutinises this issue in the context of pastoral care. Since rebuking and disciplining are primarily pastoral and not legal actions in the church.³³

3. Lastly, let us examine how the controversial relationship between Calvin and humanism can help us better understand the individualism and ecological crisis of our day. Many a scholar would argue that it was not only the debate upon free will but also his teaching on predestination that forced Calvin into opposition to humanism, the very heritage that had been his own intellectual background earlier.³⁴ This debate was being fought in defence of God’s sovereignty and the supremacy of his glory in a context that had already placed man in the centre of the universe. Calvin obviously couldn’t foresee all that later took place in the West as a result of turning the *theatrum gloriae Dei* into *theatrum gloriae hominum*. Still, he most probably felt that even if it is not able to dispel that “looming shadow”, theology is obliged to defend “God’s sovereignty”.³⁵ This has legitimacy in the theology of “protecting the creation” in the face of the irresponsible “orgy”³⁶ of a consumer society. As for the modern right for autonomy based on human free will, Calvin himself would not condemn it. For he separated the two aspects of free will much more starkly than Luther, namely: the one meaning the human decision about salvation, the other being freedom in our decisions about this world.³⁷ But beyond doubt, he would denounce the kind of deification of our individual freedom that leads to destruction of communities.

Lastly we need to mention the seemingly final conclusion of Calvin research] that there is no one hermeneutical key or motif that will safeguard correct understanding of him. Certainly there are half truths encapsulated in these trends: the orthodox reading was trying to solve the problem of God’s sovereignty through the doctrine of God and predestination; the Barthians through their Christological interpretation; and we also have the pneumatological reading that called Calvin the theologian of the Holy Spirit. Still one cannot find an all-encompassing thread by which we could string Calvin’s theology. This gives us hope that Calvin will remain such a door in the future for whose understanding we will have to try many keys – and for that very reason he has the potential to be our partner in contemporary discussions for long, long time. The historical effects of his theology so wide that even our contemporary thinkers may get inspiration from it.

³¹ In *Szöveggyűjtemény Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich műveiből*. 2. ed. (Debrecen: Filozófia-oktatók Továbbképző és Információs Központja 1985), 76.

³² *Institutio* IV. 1,10.

³³ Cf. Gyökössi Endre, “A lelkigondozó Kálvin”, in *Evangéliumi kálvinizmus*, 209–226.

³⁴ Busch, E.: *op. cit.* 70.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 71.

³⁶ The term derives from G. Hardin the father of ecological ethics. Garrett Hardin, *Exploring New Ethics for Survival* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin 1972), 168ff.

³⁷ *Institutio* II. 2,5.

Kálvin teológiájának mai olvasata

A korszakok hasonlóságaiból és különbségeiből adódó hermeneutikai problémák

Ez az előadás kolozsvári Protestáns Teológia által szervezett nemzetközi Kálvin-értekezleten hangozott el (*Kálvin teológiájának mai olvasata*, 2009. október 15–16.). Szűcs Ferenc ezzel a végső következtetéssel zárta előadását:

Kálvin megértéséhez nem lehet egyetlen hermeneutikai kulcsot, vagy vezérmotívumot kiemelni. Teológiájának megkülönböztető jellegére nézve kétségtelenül felfedezhetőek rész igazságok mind az isteni szuverenitásra vonatkozóan – ahogy az ortodox olvasat azt az Isten- és predestináció tanból próbálta megfejteni – mind a krisztológiai interpretációra vonatkozóan, ahogy azt a barthiánusok látták, mind pedig a pneumatológiai olvasat igazságát illetően, amely őt a Szentlélek teológusának nevezi. De ugyanilyen joggal nevezhetnénk őt az egyház teológusának is. Maradékalanul azonban egyetlen fonalra sem fűzhető fel Kálvin teológiája. Ez megerősítheti azt a reménységet, hogy Kálvin még hosszú időre marad olyan ajtó, akinek megértéséhez sokféle kulcsot kell kipróbálnunk, és aki éppen ezért sokáig maradhat kortársbeszélgető partnerünk. Teológiájának hatástörténete azonban igen szerteágazó, ezért abból a mai kor gondolkodója és teológusa is nyerhet inspirációt.