

## Two happy impacts upon our theological landscape: a brief appreciation of John Calvin and a tribute to Alan Torrance

In 1994 a collection of essays was published in honour of Alan Torrance, who was Professor of systematic theology at the Theological Hall, Knox College, Dunedin, from 1987 to 1993. As Peter Skegg (Professor of Law at Otago University) wrote in the foreword to that book, it was most unusual for a volume of essays to be published in honour of a scholar, teacher or minister who was not yet fifty years of age – Alan was still in his thirties at the time. But in the seven years that he had been in New Zealand he had made a significant impact on the theological landscape. Contributors to the volume included former students and colleagues across a range of academic disciplines. Many of Alan's former students went on to take up ministry, leadership, and academic positions in church and university settings.

As one of those former students, there are many things for which I am grateful in relation to Alan's teaching, not least of which is the appreciation he cultivated among many of us for John Calvin and his legacy. I came especially to appreciate Calvin's theology of worship, to which I returned time and again in parish ministry and which became a primary focus of my own academic work.

For Calvin, the activity of worship stems from our being in union with Christ, and is regarded as an act of participation in the worship that the Son offers to the Father in our place and on our behalf. It is a trinitarian event, led



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and mediated by the Son through the Spirit. As Calvin himself put it, Christ leads our songs and is the chief composer of our hymns. He is the mediator of our worship, the great high priest, who out of his measureless benevolence has taken upon himself the weight of our iniquity and clothed us with the righteousness that is his alone.

This “miraculous exchange” is expressed supremely in the eucharist, where Christ (not the officiating minister) is the host. As well as being the host, he is the one who gives himself to his people in the elements of bread and wine. We are invited to feed on him by faith

with thanksgiving, and in so doing abide in him.

Thus understood, the eucharist is not only an occasion for remembering our Lord's sacrificial and atoning death on the cross at Calvary; it is also an occasion for sharing in his risen and ascended life, and for anticipating with joy the time when the heavenly banquet, of which this meal is but a foretaste, will be complete.

All of this is evident in Calvin's eucharistic great prayer of thanksgiving, part of which reads as follows:

*In steadfast faith may we receive His body and blood, yea Christ Himself*

entire, who being true God and true man, is verily the holy bread of heaven which gives us life. So may we no longer live in ourselves, after our nature which is entirely corrupt and vicious, but may He live in us and lead us to the life that is holy, blessed and everlasting: whereby we may truly become partakers of the new and eternal testament, the covenant of grace.<sup>1</sup>

What a delightful description of our Lord at his table: "The holy bread of heaven which gives us life"! With such a rich eucharistic theology at the heart of his theology of worship, it is little wonder that Calvin advocated weekly celebration of the sacrament.

In my view, it is one of great tragedies of the Reformed tradition that Calvin never had his way on this matter. Neither did John Knox, who

transplanted Calvin's theology of worship on to Scottish soil. The consequent imbalance between word and sacrament has had a detrimental effect on Reformed worship and ecclesiology ever since. American theologian, Joseph Small, has observed that Reformed churches, so neglectful of the sacraments, so tied to words, are the churches that have divided and split more than any other church movement or tradition.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the less frequently communion is celebrated, the more our sense of being-in-communion with one another is eroded, and the more susceptible we become to an individualistic conception of faith.

One of the many benefits of having Alan Torrance as a lecturer was having his father, James, visit New Zealand periodically. James was a retired professor in systematic theology (University of Aberdeen) and author of numerous articles and one of the most incisive books one could ever hope to read on worship – *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*. Often when he came to visit Alan and the family he would

give lectures at the Theological Hall. One of his favourite subjects was the contrast between Calvin's theology and that of the federal Calvinists who came after him.

Federal theology was that form of theology which gave central place to the concept of covenant (*foedus*) and identified different covenants in God's relation to the world. These were generally described in terms of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. The covenant of works is founded in nature and in the law of God. It is applicable to all people. Unlike the covenant of grace, which

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applies to the elect only, and is grounded in the person and work of Christ, it requires no mediator between God and humankind.

James Torrance was critical of federal Calvinism on a number of grounds, not least of which was its tendency to interpret the notion of covenant in contractual terms. The obligations of grace, which in the Bible always accompany the declaration of a covenantal relationship between God and humankind, came to be interpreted as conditions of grace. The evangelical order of forgiveness and repentance was inverted so that repentance was made a condition of forgiveness. This cultivated a high level of introspection and anxiety on the part of the believer ("Have I done enough to be saved?") and resulted in a loss of joy and assurance in relation to the Christian life and the act of worship. The Lord's supper became a feast for the converted, for the elect, rather than a foretaste of an eschatological banquet for all humankind. In worship, the preaching of the word dominated the celebration of the sacrament,

which was celebrated infrequently. And as the balance between word and sacrament was lost, preaching took on a more exhortatory tone, with the focus very much on what we must do to secure our salvation.

On the dominance of the word in reformed worship, it is interesting to note that ten out of the twelve pages describing the normal Sunday service in the *Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (1645) were devoted to the act of preaching (including prayers before and after the sermon, which were very prescriptive).

One of the things for which I am most grateful to Alan Torrance was his encouragement to think hard about the priesthood of Christ. One of the great weaknesses of Calvinism was its failure to consistently follow Calvin's lead in recognising that Christ's priestly

role is ongoing. It didn't finish on the cross at Calvary. As high priest, Christ continues to lead and mediate our worship and to intercede for the world he has embraced in suffering love. As high priest, Christ continues to represent us (and all creation) before the Father, drawing us into his redemptive embrace, enabling us to discover our true, reconciled humanity in him.

One should be able to detect from all this the significance of the doctrine of the ascension for our understanding of the priesthood of Christ. When we understand the ascension aright, we realise that the Christian life is to be conceived not merely in terms of following the example of a man who lived two thousand years ago, but also as an act of participation in his risen and ascended life. Moreover, we share in this life, not in isolation from one another, but in community.

When Christians today talk about the priesthood of all believers, it is important to realise that this doctrine only has meaning insofar as our priesthood is grounded in the priesthood of Christ. It is a derivative

priesthood. Without this grounding the church can all too easily become a group of individuals, each doing what is right in their own eyes, with little cohesion or accountability. This is a particular risk in today's highly individualistic context.

I think there is much in Calvin's theology that can be instructive for today's church. I am immensely grateful to Alan Torrance for drawing our attention to this fact

during his all-too-short time on these shores.

#### Endnotes

1. John Calvin, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, Trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001), 130.
2. Joseph D. Small, *A Church of the Word and Sacrament*, Occasional Paper #16 (PCUSA Office of Theology & Worship). (Can be ordered from <http://>

[www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/pubs/generalpubs.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/pubs/generalpubs.htm)



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## “Calvin Rediscovered – New Zealand and International Perspectives” – upcoming Symposium and *Son et Lumière* performances in Dunedin



### Symposium

**Dates:** 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2009

**Venue:** Knox College, Dunedin  
Public Lectures both nights at Knox Church at 7:30 pm  
Preceded by worship service at 6 p.m. on 23 August at First Church of Otago

#### Keynote speakers

**Professor Randall Zachman**  
(University of Notre Dame)

**Professor Elsie McKee**  
(Princeton Theological Seminary)

#### Other speakers

Alison Clarke  
Ivor Davidson  
Peter Matheson  
Angela McCarthy  
Murray Rae  
John Stenhouse

### Cost & Registration:

Conference fee \$60 (\$40 for students) This includes the cost of morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea at Knox College. It also includes complimentary admission to the *Son et Lumière* performance

Conference participants must arrange their own accommodation. Participants from the North Island may be eligible for a travel subsidy

The conference is supported by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, the University of Otago, the First Church of Otago, and the City of Dunedin.

### Son et Lumière production

**Dates:** 20<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2009  
**Venue:** First Church of Otago)

### Keynote Speakers profiles

**Randall C. Zachman** is Professor of Reformation Studies at Notre Dame (Illinois) His area of interest is the history of Christian thought from the Reformation period to the present.

**Elsie McKee** is the Archibald Alexander Professor of Reformation Studies and the History of Worship at Princeton Theological Seminary. She is an elder and a member of the session at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church. She teaches courses on the theology of Calvin and prayer practices in Christian history. Her interests include: church history, exegesis, theology, and worship, women and laity in the Reformation, John Calvin's sermons, commentaries, and doctrine of the church.