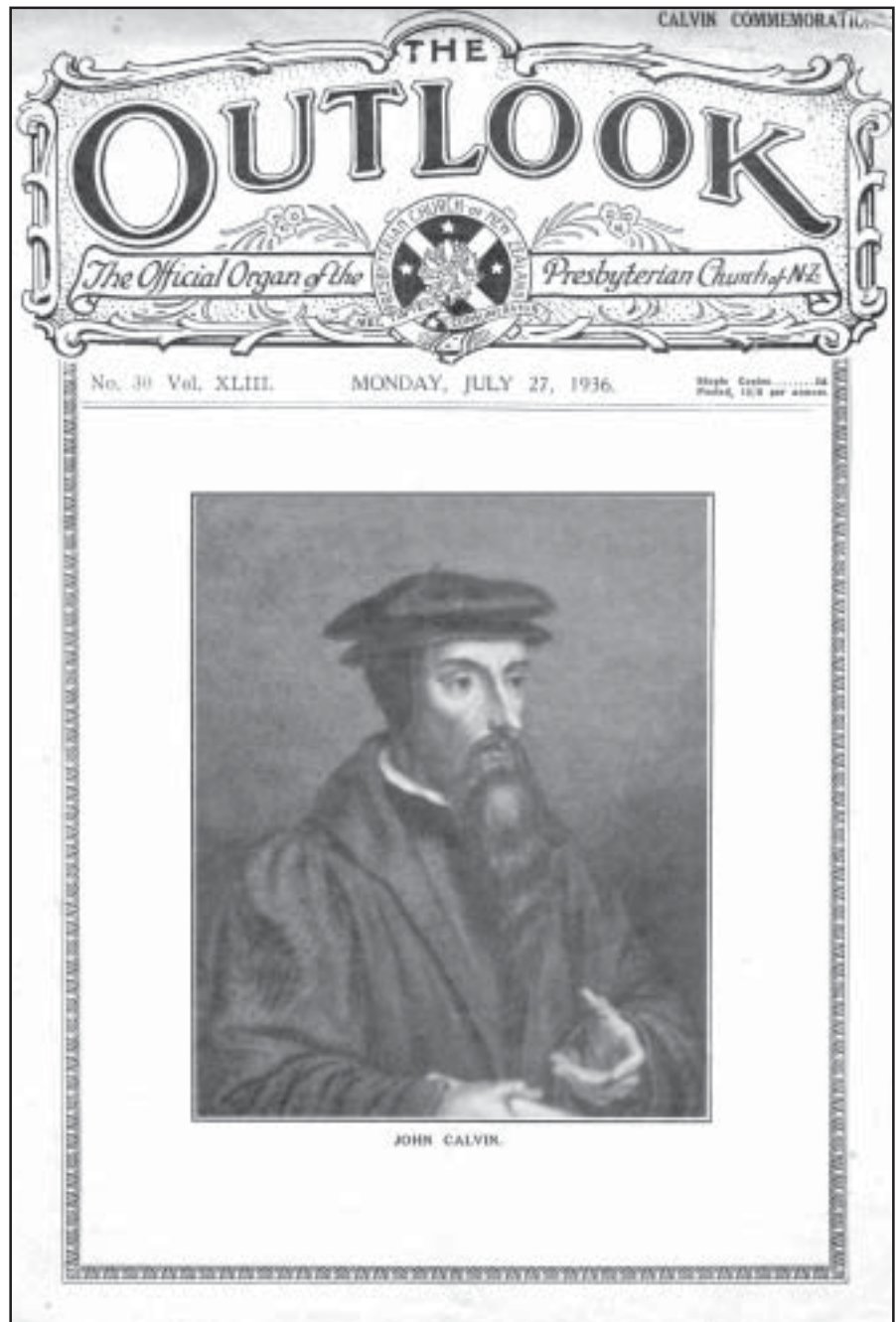


John Calvin in Godzone

All round the Reformed world this year, five hundred years after John Calvin was born in Noyon, Picardy, there will be reflection on the historic and ongoing influence of his theology, scholarship, and reform initiatives. A steady flow of recent

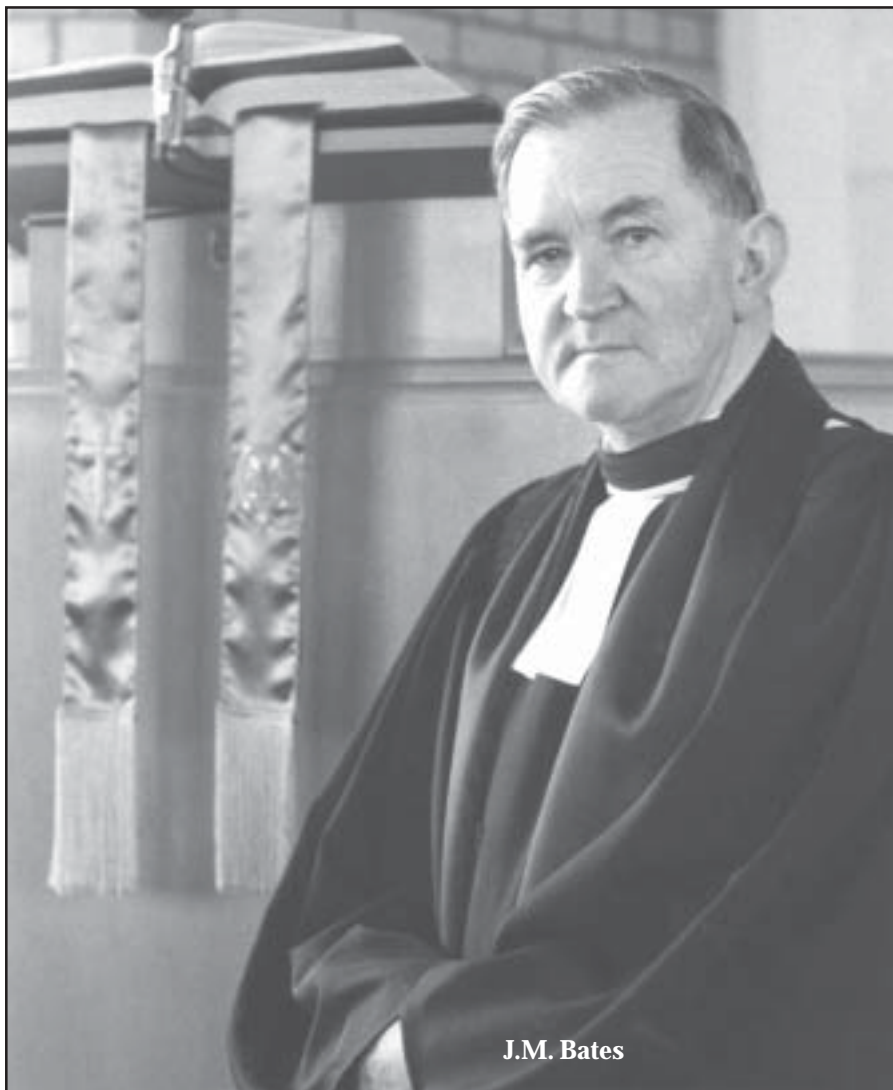
“All round the Reformed world this year, five hundred years after John Calvin was born in Noyon, Picardy, there will be reflection on the historic and ongoing influence of his theology, scholarship, and reform initiatives.”

books and articles, much of it stemming from the United States, has already demonstrated a considerable shift away from previous understandings of Calvin. This change of perspective is of far more than mere academic interest. In his own day Calvin was a radical theologian of exile. Many of his followers, likewise, found themselves either in flight from their home country, or at odds with the authorities there. Given Calvin's attraction, then, to the alienated and the avant-garde in the early modern period: to the professionals, the scholars, to lay people seeking a new way into the Bible, and a fresh blueprint for a just society, it has always been rather paradoxical that since the Enlightenment, Calvin or Calvinism have tended to attract the more conservative or even reactionary circles within the Churches. This situation, however, no longer pertains in the same way.



The pastoral, exegetical, and educational priorities in Calvin's life and work are being emphasised as never before, while traditional perceptions of his logocentrism have also been challenged. We recollect, too, that in the desolate days of the Third Reich the Reformed tradition was at the forefront of offering a critique of totalitarianism.

So today we are asking with a fresh urgency: who was this man Calvin, and what manner of movement did he set in train? It may well be that for some time to come the answer will continue to elude us, but the questions now being thrown up in historical and systematic theology are certainly relevant to the impact of Calvinism's thought on



J.M. Bates

attention has been paid to the contribution of J.M. Bates, who was frozen out of the professorial chair he richly deserved in Knox Theological Hall, but who led a considerable resurgence of interest in Calvin in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Thus any conclusions at this stage about Calvinism's impact on this society and its churches must obviously be very tentative.

We will also need to define our terms. What is meant by Calvinism? Among scholars a distinction is often drawn between the theology of Calvin himself, and later orthodox or classical Calvinism, which moved in a more contractual and rationalist direction. In popular and journalistic parlance it is largely deployed as a term of abuse in this country. Jim Gorman's illustration for James K. Baxter's 1967 poem, 'A Small Ode on Mixed Flatting' sums up this misanthropic reading of Calvinism. A dour Calvin, one enormous finger pointing up to heaven, confronts a grinning Rabbie Burns, who gives him the two fingers! Calvin's significance, for many, remains synonymous with intolerance and Puritanism.

New Zealand. On the most obvious level, they nudge us to look again at the tendency to identify the influence of Calvin with adherence to, or alienation from, the Westminster Standards, which would, indeed, be rather similar to equating Catholic theology in New Zealand with the decrees of the

Council of Trent, or Anglicanism with Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity!*

We do face, however, some considerable difficulties in assessing the influence of Calvin and Calvinism in this country. Quite apart from the fact that tracing the impact of a set of ideas or values such as Calvinism on something as complex and changeable as our society and culture will always have

something of the will o' the wisp about it, almost none of the basic research has been done. The question we are addressing is a

“A further transmogrification of Calvinism then took place in the young colony of New Zealand.”

largely unexplored one. We have no monographs at all even on the most prominent advocates of Calvinism in this country, such as the redoubtable James MacGregor, (1829-1894), one time Professor at New College Edinburgh, who was a distinguished Presbyterian minister in Oamaru from 1882. There are virtually no scholarly studies at all on New Zealand Calvinism. A modest exception is that some

Folk Calvinism

Then, again, there is that populist variant we may dub “folk Calvinism” which had probably the most direct impact on New Zealand.

In its Free Church form, for example, which had considerable early influence on the Otago settlement, Calvinism was filtered through

the experience of the seventeenth century Scottish Covenanters and the 1843 Disruption. The Covenanters were regarded as traitors by the Stuarts and had been suppressed ruthlessly. Under Thomas Chalmers, the Disruption led to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland. Here again the “Crown Rights of the Redeemer” were championed against the legal rights of aristocratic and patrician

patrons to nominate the minister for a congregation. A further transmutation of Calvinism then took place in the young colony of New Zealand. John Knox and Covenanters such as Samuel Rutherford and the iconic figure of Thomas Chalmers himself tended to figure as prominently as Calvin himself in the imaginations of New Zealand Presbyterians, as stained glass windows such as those of Knox Church, Dunedin testify. Bookshelves of lay people as well as ministers, as well as countless little congregational libraries would often contain books with dramatic illustrations of Covenanting martyrs, male and female, or depicting the hardships of the Disruption, as the parishioners trooped out of their beloved church into the snow. Far from "Home", Presbyterians in New Zealand identified with this tradition of hardship and exile.

When the four hundredth anniversary of Calvin's birth was celebrated in 1909, therefore, it was an exclusively Presbyterian affair. Calvin had been decked out, so to speak, in kilt and sporran. There was a notable absence of any reference to him within New Zealand Anglicanism, despite the influence of Calvin on Anglicanism's foundational Thirty-Nine Articles. This is worth noting, because in 1936 the 400th anniversary of the first appearance of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was heralded by a more scholarly and inclusive approach.

Sources

What are the sources for the study of Calvinism's impact on New Zealand? The Rare Books Room in the Hewitson Library in Knox College offers us a glimpse into the heavy artillery available in the middle decades of the nineteenth century to a handful of scholars at least. Here are lined up the weighty sixteenth and seventeenth century folio tomes of Calvin's commentaries

on the Bible, together with editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, all in Latin of course. Many will have belonged to James MacGregor, or to William Salmond, the first Professor at the Theological Hall, and to his successors such as Dunlop and Hewitson and Dickie. Together with Calvin's own works we see arrayed the big leather bound volumes of seventeenth century classical Calvinists such as Turretine, who was greatly admired by MacGregor. It seems highly improbable, though, that much of

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this percolated down even to the ablest of the parish ministers and elders of the time. All we have in that regard is student notes on Dickie's lectures on the Westminster Confession.

More indicative of lay interest is the very substantial collection of pamphlets relating to the 1843 Free Church Disruption in the Hewitson Library, many of our copies again stemming from James MacGregor. Their theological content and relevance to an assessment of Calvinism's influence, however, are very limited, though they do raise interesting issues about the relationship between Church and State. Remarkable, though, is the abundance of popularly written books about the Covenanters, and the "Worthies", or outstanding personalities, of the Disruption. With their vivid illustrations, these mediate, so to speak, a coffee-table view of Calvinism. In the young colony the rapid erosion of differences between the various brands of Presbyterianism in Scotland: the Established Church, the Free Church, the United Presbyterians, and even a few Reformed Presbyterians meant, however, that the Disruption controversies had a diminishing hold on the pious imagination. The

covenanting tradition also rapidly died out. The Heritage Centre at First Church, Dunedin, however, attracts a steady flow of visitors, and testifies to a continuing interest in Presbyterianism's Scottish and Calvinist origins.

Puritan theology is another area well represented in the Hewitson Rare Books collection, and of course, its debt to Calvinism was considerable. Puritanism, too, has remained a strong focus of interest to New Zealand historians such as Ian Breward, Tim Cooper, and others.

Another well documented source of influence on New Zealand Presbyterianism were the writings of nineteenth century Free Churchmen such as William

Cunningham, of New College, Edinburgh, and then, towards the end of the century, the outstanding Edinburgh preacher, Alexander Whyte. Principal Rainy's visit to New Zealand should also be mentioned. Another crucial source of influence was the Princeton School in the United States, whose leading proponents such as Charles Hodge mounted a trenchant defence of biblical infallibility. James Macgregor's correspondence showed that he kept in the closest touch both with New College and Princeton.

The liberal alternative

A succession of well-documented and fierce theological controversies, particularly in Dunedin, throws considerable light, however, on the waning strength of this brand of traditional Calvinism. William Salmond had been something of a banner-carrier for Presbyterianism in Dunedin, having had considerable success with a series of public lectures on biblical inspiration and Christology in what was an intellectually lively community. The challenge of historico-critical approaches to the Bible and of the scientific discoveries and theories of Darwin and others, were discussed with remarkable openness in

Dunedin and Salmond was in the midst of that. After, however, he had moved from the Theological Hall to a chair of philosophy at the young University of Otago, Salmond launched in 1886 an electrifying attack on what he termed the “intellectual terrorism” of Calvinism. His racy written pamphlet, *The Reign of Grace*, proved a best-seller, swiftly going through five editions. It was highly critical of traditional understandings of predestination, and clearly touched a sensitive nerve, though it lacked the Christological and biblical depth of McLeod Campbell’s similar critique in Scotland. Predictably, no

doubt, James MacGregor led the attack on Salmond, in his pamphlet, *The Day of Salvation*. The advocacy of Dunedin’s most prominent preachers at the time, such as Rutherford Waddell and James Gibb in

First Church, prevented the charge of heresy against Salmond being pursued.

As the chief scholarly defender of Calvinism, James MacGregor was a conservative, but in no way a bigot. He had stoutly defended Professor W. Robertson Smith’s right to argue in 1875 for a historico-critical approach to the Old Testament in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, though personally disagreeing with his conclusions. He was formidably learned, had an international reputation, and enjoyed telling a joke against himself. His main apologetic work, however, followed a rationalistic bent which was a far cry from Calvin’s scriptural approach.

MacGregor found himself, however, increasingly on his own in the New Zealand context. The theological tide was changing. The steady move towards a more liberal brand of Presbyterianism parallels, of course, similar transformations in Scotland and Australia. In his irenic survey of Presbyterian theology in New Zealand, J.M. Bates describes the emergence of a liberal witness

characterised by “evangelical warmth, religious seriousness and a respect for knowledge and truth” which from the late nineteenth century accompanied the main current of orthodoxy. Thus, when the quatercentenary celebrations of Calvin were held in 1909, at the high tide of liberalism, the fulsome recognition of the greatness of the reformer was qualified by concern at his rigorism. Calvin was now regarded as having been rather severe on predestination, a hard man for hard times.

Side by side with a formal adherence to the Westminster Standards went a growing openness

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among ministers to biblical criticism, to evolutionary ideas, to German theologians such as Ritschl and Schleiermacher, even to the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. “Liberty of opinion” on many issues became more and more common.

The real strength of the Calvinist tradition now lay at a more popular level, especially, one suspects, in the rural districts, though this would have to be documented by further research. In the 1909 celebrations, when Calvinism was hailed as the mother of heroes and martyrs, Calvin was seen above all as the founding father of Presbyterianism, and of its biblical patterns of church life. This sentimental evocation of the past hardly encouraged any real wrestling with Calvinist thought. Yet the Westminster Confession and more importantly the Shorter Catechism remained important for Presbyterian preaching and teaching until well into the twentieth century. In some congregations, at least, the Shorter Catechism was still being taught to Sunday school students in the early 1950s. In a world of

bewildering change the Westminster documents still appeared to a substantial minority to be the most comprehensive framework within which the world and its history could be understood, with a particular emphasis on the key doctrines of the sovereignty of God, the atonement, and the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture.

Calvinism and fundamentalism

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, an adherence to what was perceived as classical Calvinism was increasingly the preserve of those of a more

fundamentalist persuasion. The Australasian monthly, *The Biblical Recorder*, edited for decades by the fiery New Zealand Presbyterian minister, P.B. Fraser, is a rich source for

evangelical Calvinism in the early decades of the twentieth century. It offered its readers a generous coverage of international publications and events. Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield were among the authorities it most frequently cited. Its large circulation extended well beyond the Presbyterian camp, and despite its strong polemic against what it regarded as “German infidels” and New Zealand scholars such as Professor John Dickie, who was cautiously encouraging a move away from Calvinist orthodoxy in the Presbyterian Church’s Theological Hall, the views of its opponents were remarkably clearly presented. P.B. Fraser’s *Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith* itself boasted sales of 15,000 copies. Yet, in its negativity towards contemporary thought and critical biblical scholarship and its individualistic evangelicalism, the *Biblical Recorder* represented a rather bizarre form of Calvinism. Fraser, for example, preferred Zwingli’s view of the sacraments to that of Calvin.

New Calvinism

On the other hand a genuine renaissance of Calvinist scholarship did emerge briefly in New Zealand in the 1930s as part of the fascination with the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, and flowing from a disenchantment with liberalism. There was talk of a "New Calvinism". Leading Presbyterians such as James Gibb, now at St John's, Wellington, who had begun as a strong evangelical Calvinist, and then moved on to champion liberalism and Christian Socialism, now showed considerable interest in Barth and, mediated through him, in Calvin. Prominent Anglicans, Baptists, and in particular a group of very able young Presbyterian ministers, J.M. Bates, I.W. Fraser, J.T.V. Steele, and James Baird, were involved in

launching the short lived *New Zealand Journal of Theology* in 1932. Who knows what success it would have had, if finances had not been so desperately difficult during the Depression years? Theological refresher courses were conducted as part of the campaign to raise awareness of the Reformed heritage and ensured that, again in Bates' words, "there has not been any other period in the history of the Presbyterian Church when theology was so alive." Worship, too, was deepened within Presbyterianism by a reencounter with Calvin's and Knox's Eucharistic thought. This prompted a sharp critique of the arbitrary and unstructured forms of Puritan and Evangelical piety which had pervaded many quarters of the Church. The Church Service Society, which still exists, reminds us that Calvinism had a considerable influence on liturgical life.

The special issue of the *Outlook* to commemorate Calvin's 1536 *Institutes* is a good indication of the real aims of Steele, Bates and their colleagues: not to recover, as they put it, the antiquarian bones of Calvin, but through this "greatest man in the

history of the Reformed Catholic Church" to rediscover the Bible as the Word of God. Their enthusiasm ran away with them somewhat. Acres of closely written print imposed considerable demands on the reader. The *Institutes* were paraphrased, their historical background traced, and in the biographical material the humanity of Calvin is rightly emphasised. Yet the apologetic tone could be evident, as in the comments on the burning of Servetus for his views on the Trinity. There are useful sections on Calvin's ethical thought, and on his churchmanship, emphasising his catholicity of outlook.

"Neither the modernism of Lloyd Geering nor the Evangelicalism of his opponents really engaged with Calvin's theology."

Nothing comparable to this enthusiasm for Calvin was to be witnessed after the Second World War. Bates himself concluded towards the end of his life that the main theological influences on the churches in his time had been those of Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and perhaps above all Tillich. Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, as mediated through their New Zealand disciple, Helmut Rex, were also important.

The Calvin renaissance, it would seem, had been short-lived. Apart from due references to his historical importance, there have been few obvious traces of interest in Calvin in church life and thought in recent years. The vigour of the 1930s revival had concealed weakness. It was marred by hagiographical tendencies, and was blind to the hermeneutical challenge of reading Calvin in a very different cultural context and time. There was remarkably little awareness of New Zealand's or indeed Australasia's particular history and place in the world. Yet we have to remember that it did not have the benefit of the scholarly work on Calvin's pastoral, exegetical and linguistic

achievements available to us today. As the work of a few enthusiastic ministers, working in their spare time, it deserves considerable respect.

As the twentieth century neared its end, therefore, an interest in Calvin tended to be a minority concern. Those, almost solely within Presbyterianism, who were critical of what they saw as liberal or post-modernist tendencies in theology sometimes turned to a form of Westminster orthodoxy, but there was little creative encounter with Calvin himself. Neither the modernism of Lloyd Geering nor the evangelicalism of his opponents

really engaged with Calvin's theology. Perhaps the emergent concern for public theology, contextual theology, and for a theology of exile, reflective of the diaspora situation of the

churches in New Zealand, will lead to a renewed interest in the exegetical, socio-political, and ecclesiological initiatives of Calvin and his immediate followers. It will also be interesting to see whether the new resources we now possess will enable Calvin to be read again today as the scholar and provocateur he was in his own time.



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