

Protestant Reformation

The Calvin500 Celebration: Sincere Homage or Sad Hypocrisy?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

During the 500th anniversary of his birth, Reformed church leaders are paying homage to John Calvin and other 16th century Reformers. But are the sponsors and speakers at the Calvin500 Celebration true sons of the prophets — or like the Pharisees of old, are they hypocrites decorating their tombs?

"You Garnish the Sepulchres of the Righteous"

In a 1960 address to a meeting honoring another great Reformer, John Knox, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said this:

These are terrible and terrifying words: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?' [Matthew 23:29-33]

Now those are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ and He was addressing His own generation, His own contemporaries. He said, in effect, You are paying great tribute to the memory of the prophets; you are looking after and garnishing their sepulchres and you are saying what great men they were — How noble, how wonderful, we must keep their memory alive — and you say

what a terrible thing it was that your forefathers should have put these men to death. If you had been alive then, you maintain, you would not have joined them in those wicked deeds; you would have listened to the prophets, you would have followed them. You hypocrites, says our Lord, you would have done nothing of the sort.

How, then, does He prove it? Well, He does it in this way. He tests their sincerity by discovering what their attitude is at the present to the successors to the prophets. What is their reaction to the people who are still preaching the same message as the prophets? He says, You say that you are admirers of the prophets and yet you are persecuting and trying to compass the death of a man like myself who is the modern representative of the same message, and the same school of prophecy. Ah, says our Lord, it is one thing to look back and to praise famous men, but that can be sheer hypocrisy. The test of our sincerity this evening is this: What do we feel about, and how are we treating, the men who, today, are preaching the same message as was preached by John Knox and his fellow reformers?

So, you see, this meeting is a very important one for us. You cannot do a thing like this [meeting to honor the Reformers] without examining yourself, without coming under scrutiny. Our presence indicates that we are admirers of these great prophets of God, but I wonder whether we are in reality? So it is a good thing, it seems to me, that we should come together, if only so that we can examine ourselves in the light of this word of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.[1]

The recently-concluded (July 2009) Calvin500 Tribute Conference in Geneva certainly deserves the same kind of Biblical scrutiny of which Dr. Lloyd-Jones spoke. What are the attitudes of the Calvin500 Conference organizers and speakers toward the beliefs

of the man they claim to honor? Sad to say, the Calvin500 sponsors and speakers are weighed in the Bible's scales and found wanting.[2]

"You Are Witnesses Unto Yourselves"

Among the featured speakers were men like Dr. Peter Lillback, president of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Lillback teaches and has publicly defended a doctrine of salvation by faith plus works — the very thing that Calvin and the other Reformation champions of justification by faith alone abhorred. He is also the author of *The Binding of God*, which is a revisionist history of Calvin's doctrinal positions.

A number of the speakers honoring Calvin were ministers of the Presbyterian Church in America. The PCA has refused to take a strong stand against the Federal Visionist heresy of salvation by water baptism, and the maintenance of salvation by ongoing participation in the Lord's Supper and the life of the church. This false teaching continues to plague the PCA despite the fact that a study committee has supposedly "dealt with it." The Federal Vision is at its core the same false doctrine that Calvin and the other Reformers did not merely express concern over, as the PCA report did — the Reformers thundered against these things as damnable heresies on the authority of Scripture. And by that same authority, they did not treat those who held such beliefs as "brethren" as the PCA men do; they treated them as the sons of Rome and sons of the devil that they truly are.

Other speakers at the Calvin500 Conference were ordained men of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, which likewise has not only tolerated but has facilitated the spread of the heresy of justification by faith plus works. The 2004 OPC General Assembly acquitted Ruling Elder John O. Kinnaird, who with his allies taught and continues to teach this false doctrine that leads souls to Hell. In 2006, the OPC General Assembly commended to its churches a study report on the doctrine of

justification. The committee that produced the report avoided discussion of Romans 2:13, the passage which the heretics use as the lynchpin of their false teaching. It did so in deference to OPC minister Dr. Richard Gaffin, who although he is one of the false teachers himself, was a member of the study committee. The committee's report pointed to doctrinal problems outside the OPC, but refused to even acknowledge, much less deal with, the false teaching within it.

Among the institutions sponsoring the Calvin500 commemoration was Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where Dr. Lillback is president and Dr. Gaffin was a professor for over forty years. Westminster has long taught a revisionist version of the doctrinal positions of John Calvin that has opened the door to false teachings on Biblical interpretation, systematic theology, the doctrine of salvation, and the doctrine of the church. Several Westminster faculty and board members were conference speakers.

Another sponsoring seminary, Erskine in North Carolina, is the official divinity school of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod. Erskine Seminary has become a hotbed of the false teachings of the Emergent Church movement, which denies the Reformation doctrines of the inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, and unique authority of Scripture; salvation from sin and Hell by God's grace alone, by faith alone, in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ alone; and the doctrine that the glory for salvation, indeed for all things, belongs to God alone — denial of the very beliefs for which Calvin and others risked, and in many cases forfeited, their lives.

The Calvin500 website includes a link to Calvin's biography in a Roman Catholic online encyclopedia.

"Fill Up the Measure of Your Fathers"

In Dr. Lloyd-Jones' time in Great Britain, many in the church were willing to enter into compromise with those who engaged in such doctrinal deviancy while "garnishing the tombs of the prophets" of the Reformation. The same has become true in America in this generation. The fact that other speakers and sponsors of the Calvin500 Conference who claim to oppose doctrinal deviancy were willing to join hands with these "children of those who killed the prophets" says terrible things about their own spiritual integrity, and it is a reflection of the state of spiritual discernment in the American church at large today.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones' observations on the state of the church in his time form a poignant reminder of this fact: Much of today's church views the Reformation as a tragic mistake that must be undone. We shall look at Dr. Lloyd-Jones words on "the state of the church" in our next article.

Next: ["What of the state of the church?"](#)

References:

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Remembering the Reformation" in Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions, 1942-1977 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989). 92-93.
2. Data about speakers and sponsors was taken from information viewed at the Calvin500 website, <http://www.calvin500.org/about.html>, in June, 2009.

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