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Calvin and Scotland

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How did one Frenchman, John Calvin, who died basically a refugee in a foreign city and was buried in an unmarked grave, come to have his name and thought so closely associated with Scotland? For generations, Scottish Presbyterianism has been seen as Calvinist or Calvinian. The origins of this association have centred at the popular level around John Knox’s great praise of John Calvin’s work in Geneva in those now virtually immortal words: “The most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.” John Knox’s time in Geneva was certainly of paramount importance for shaping his vision for reformation in Scotland.

The tracing of the influence of Calvin upon Scotland’s Reformation and in subsequent generations is sometimes easy to identify and at other times more complex. The reality is that there were diversities within the Calvinian family due in part to national contexts and the personalities and limitations of the locations. Thus, as the Reformed faith emerged in Scotland, it was greatly indebted to Calvin; yet at the same time, it formed its unique expressions of Calvinian theology and practice. Before proceeding to ask just what were the areas of Calvin’s influence upon Scotland, we must ask: Was Calvin the originator of all that he taught? The answer must be strongly asserted that Calvin himself owed a great debt to fellow Reformers and other writers. Not that long ago, Tony Lane wrote, “Martin Bucer was the father of Calvinism.” The point is well made – Calvin was mentored by, schooled by, influenced by and indebted to others. In no way does this detract from his genius; rather, it makes us realize that the Body of Christ is ever interconnected. Behind a Paul there was a Barnabas.

In this brief article, mention will be made of six ways that John Calvin’s influence spread in Scotland: church government, discipline as “the reformation of morals”, worship and liturgy, preaching, universities and divinity studies, and doctrine.

Upon the return of John Knox and other Scots Reformers to Scotland in 1559, the organization began of a national church along the foundational elements of Presbyterian polity and discipline. This would be refined in the next generation, but at its heart were the offices of the minister of the Word and sacrament and the ruling elders or governors. Here the foundation was laid for the emergence of the other church courts through the “exercise” (in time, the presbytery) and the General Assembly.

Closely connected to polity was the application of church discipline to truly reform the moral fabric of the church and nation. The Scottish Reformers had seen this at work on the continent. The desire for God’s glory, the good of souls and the prevention of the ongoing spread of sin were the three goals for the practice. The elders came to play a critical role in the process of the exercise of discipline. Popularly it came to be known as the “stool of repentance”.

Scotland's Reformation worship moved from Lutheran Protestantism to Genevan liturgical practices. The *Book of Common Order* (sometimes known as Knox's Liturgy) was closely tied to Geneva and had its origins in Geneva's English congregation of refugees. This book was basically from Calvin and remained in use in Scotland until the Westminster Directory of the mid-seventeenth century. The metrical psalm singing tradition would come to characterize Scottish Presbyterianism for generations, and it certainly owed much of its inspiration to the Genevan example.

The Scottish Reformation was clearly a time of a revival in preaching. The Scots Reformers, like Calvin, took the Bible as their sole authority and believed preaching was the real food for souls. It can be argued that Scotland was influenced in part by Calvin's exposition of consecutive text preaching and lecturing. This came to develop in Scotland as the Sabbath lecture, which was consecutive, textual teaching and was distinct from the Sabbath sermon.

Reform affected virtually every area of society including educational reform. The *First Book of Discipline* outlined a vision for education throughout the land. A literate culture was the goal – to be disciplined in scriptural truth and understanding. Calvin's influence in the area of education can most directly be seen in the curriculum of the Scottish universities from the 1560s to the mid-sixteenth century. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* became one of the standard textbooks for divinity students. The refiner of Scottish Presbyterianism, Andrew Melville, used the *Institutes* along with the Scriptures as his chief texts in Glasgow and at St. Andrews. Calvin's Geneva Catechism was also often used for divinity students, usually in Latin metrical form. Many scholars have argued that the creation of the post-Reformation Edinburgh University was inspired by the Genevan Academy.

Finally, anyone reading Scottish theology from the Reformation period onward will conclude that "Calvinism" as a theological system has been at the centre of many of the polemical theological debates over the centuries. True, these debates may have been directed toward his successors; nevertheless, many of the points of discussion can be traced back to John Calvin.

To understand Scottish Protestant church history, Scottish education, worship, theology and moral reform, one must consider the influence of the refugee of Geneva, John Calvin – and we have not touched on all areas of possible influence – there are more. Scotland's application of Calvinian thought may on occasion have been unique, yet the lines of continuity are there. It is ever amazing to consider how one individual could be used in such a vast way.

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