

Why A Calvin Comeback?

According to Mark Oppenheimer of the New York Times, American churches are experiencing a resurgence of young people who are embracing the teachings of John Calvin. Growth in Churches that lean that way are reportedly up, and young people are coming out of seminaries and building their ministries on these teachings.

So the obvious question is why? To get at the heart of this we must understand a little bit about what John Calvin taught and why he is seen as an influential figure in church history.

Mark speaks about two of the points in the TULIP, an acronym used by those who embrace Calvin's interpretation of the scripture as it relates specifically to regeneration.

The two that Mark writes about are Total Depravity of Man, and Unconditional Election.

I think that that he has accurately selected the "Big Two" that are behind a renewed interest in Church attendance, but it is important to know that there are three other points in TULIP. They are as follows: Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints.

I do however see that the remaining three can be dismissed as somewhat academic, for whether God died for only the elect or the whole World is at best of a small impact to our situation, and Irresistible Grace only works if you believe Unconditional Election and it seems as if most would agree that Perseverance of the Saints in light of also believing in Unconditional Election must be a solid Bible idea as we are not talking about working out our salvation. We arrive back at the two Mark Mentions as the big hang-ups for most people.

So out of all the teachings of Calvin what is it that is drawing people to these Churches? Let's take a look at both and see what we can discover.

I think that any Bible reader and believer would understand that the scripture teaches that men and women are sinners and that by their own nature do not seek God and have gone their own way.

But in practice I think that Churches in general over the past 30 years have been on a track to minimize Man's sinful, dead condition, and opted instead for a more palatable, positive message. A message that doesn't deny man's sinfulness but just simply doesn't mention it all that much. What we are seeing is that a 20 or 30 year-experiment by the church at large to emphasize only God's love and acceptance has ended in failure.

I believe that young people who watched their parents struggle through this, and Pastor's who finally woke up have rightly noted that this approach did much damage to the church's credibility especially in the 90's, as it offered no real answer to the sin and guilt.

After all if God was here for me and my health and wealth and worship shouldn't I feel better about myself?

What is surprising is that just the opposite of what Evangelical-Engineers had designed, as the best way to market the truth is the most effective. I believe what we are seeing now is that the raw Gospel itself is particularly appealing because it's the truthful explanation of what we see in our own lives and the daily world in which we live. We were sinners in need of rescuing, and no amount of positive thinking or behavioral modification will make us alive.

Not only has the false perception of man been righted, the proper image of God has been brought into agreement with what we find in scripture. Even though he may have had some dramatic shortcomings, one thing we can say about Calvin is that he allowed God to be God.

I think that because of the run of entitlement that we have experienced in this country in the last 50 years, men and women are returning in droves to believe what the scripture teaches about a sovereign God. You may ask how the two are related? Entitlement teaches or believes that I am at the center of the universe, but God's Word teaches that God is the only one who is entitled to anything.

People I talk to these days are sick of apologizing for God. Why? "Because we shouldn't have to, He's God." If you believe anything else, you don't believe in the God of the Bible.

So why is this hard teaching bringing such attention and causing people to be more committed to the church? I mean shouldn't a hard row to hoe cause less people to be drawn in.

There seems to be a correlation with this new resurgence of Calvin's teachings and a more theological approach to Church in general and delivering the message in particular. In the decade past the emphasis seemed to be on what man could do, i.e. great worship music with lights and fog machines, trendy messages with high definition graphics and visual aids. If you don't think I am right, you don't get the worship designer magazines that I get.

What I'm most excited about is that it seems like those distractions have now been uncovered for what they were; engaging, exciting, entertaining waste of time. Unfortunately they also had the effect of keeping us from the real message. The Gospel Got a face lift. It had to be hip and cool, with a couple of swooshes beside it. So what does this have to do with theology? Well you see, studying the Bible for what I should personally believe takes a great amount of time and effort. It can be intense and mind-numbing at times. At the end of a lot of study, you might have

more questions than when you began. This does not sit well with our bullet-pointed, 15 minute news cycle society. It doesn't sit well with the church who's goal is to have everyone think, look and act just like the preacher.

In the last half of the past century and continuing even into our current time, great amounts of time spent at anything seemed Neanderthal. I mean couldn't we get a machine to do those jobs for us. Or maybe the preacher could just tell me what to believe.

What seems to be the case is that people are finding out that a deep look at God's Word is worth the effort. And I'm just going to be brutally honest here, men like John Piper, Tim Keller, and others are doing a better job at studying and writing than the non-Calvinist who just rant and rave in the old style using old one liners of no real substance that can be seen for what they are, "out of context quippy quotes that stir the emotion, or head off on a tangent, but leave us feeling like these men haven't read the same Bible"

I think that hard tasks that are rewarding and hard messages that offer real change are now more important than every in our instant everything day and age.

I want to close by saying that I'm not a Calvinist. I believe in the depravity of Man and I see God's election in the scriptures, but that's not really my main point today. I want us to recognize that the Word of God should be revered and studied above any system of theology or agenda driven Church like "right to life" or "KJV" or prosperity preaching. It high time that we applauded people who want to know what the word says and are willing to get into the weeds to find out for themselves. That's in fact why I think these Calvinistic leaning churches are growing. Because they are counter culture places that have a foundation built on taking God's Word for what it says even if it's a hard saying.

And where else are you going to find that?