



Kenneth J. Stewart is professor of theological studies and former chair of the department of biblical and theological studies at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He holds an M.Phil. in early modern European history from the University of Waterloo and a Ph.D. in nineteenth-century Christianity from the University of Edinburgh.

The Calvinism We Never Knew

Why have you written a book for those who are already consciously Calvinist?

I can think of five reasons. First of all, like some other strands of Christianity, the Calvinist strain has a tendency to generate its share of extremists. It troubles me that the Calvinist movement seems to be reluctant to admit that this tendency to extremes exists. Second, as with other strains of Christianity, Calvinism nurtures a primeval tendency that cripples well-intentioned attempts to come to terms with cultures and societies very different from the one the movement was birthed in. If there are Methodist believers for whom annual camp meetings are the high watermark of spirituality, or Baptists for whom quoting John Bunyan or Charles Spurgeon is always a good idea, Calvinists have a default tendency to quote John Calvin and to prefer the sixteenth century. On this view, the century of the Reformation is apparently incapable of being improved. Third, Calvinism also suffers from seriously underestimating its own potential for diverse development. Let me be frank: this is the notion of hewing to some primitive distinctive or distinctives, when very often there were and are alternatives. Fourth, Calvinism as a movement also tends to underestimate its own complexity; that is, it is a whole composed of parts—some of which regularly prove very difficult. Calvinism's *origins* are composite, its *doctrines* may be reckoned to be complex, and its approaches to the *communication of the gospel* have been varied. Finally, the Calvinist movement has often stood and still stands opposed by persons and parties who perceive that in one or more aspects this expression of the Christian faith is defective and dangerous. Paying greater attention to these recurring complaints from the unconvinced will help to keep today's Calvinist movement from a false triumphalism; it will also help to keep it circumspect.

What are four myths that Calvinists should not be circulating, but are?

1. One man—Calvin—and one city—Geneva—is determinative.

The lore implying the centrality of Calvin and Geneva passed down from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is flawed inasmuch as it was based on a kind of selective reporting about places and persons. Though it may sound very odd, given the persistence of these legends of Calvin and of Geneva's perpetual eminence in wider Protestant Christianity, the fact is that Calvin's literary and theological influence had actually gone into eclipse by the late sixteenth century. But this began to be reversed at just about the point in European history when Napoleon met his Waterloo and peace returned to Europe, due to four factors: a growing romanticism in theology, resurgent Catholicism after the 1815 Council of Vienna, an evangelical resurgence at Geneva and a flurry of Calvin republication. We must be ready to consider the possibility that our still-current fixation on Calvin above other Reformers is as much a reflection of the wide availability of his translated works in the past century-and-a-half as it is a reflection of his early greatness.

AUTHOR Q & A

Stewart has written extensively on issues surrounding the Reformed faith. He is the author of *Restoring the Reformation* in Paternoster's series *Studies in Evangelical History and Thought* and served as coeditor (with Michael Haykin) of *The Emergence of Evangelicalism*.

Stewart has also been a contributor to reference works such as the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* and the *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*.

2. Calvin's view of predestination must be ours.

We need to acknowledge that from across Reformation Europe, anecdotal evidence soon emerged that there were persons allied with the young Protestant movement who did not endorse any scheme of predestination capable of being understood as exclusionary. We can observe the continuation of this resistance into the opening decades of the seventeenth century. Within even a half-century of Calvin's death the doctrine of predestination—because it had justifiably engendered protest—was being stated with greater care and circumspection than in Calvin's time. Is there some obligation that we simply take over his view as it continues to be available to us in his widely republished works? Far from it!

3. TULIP is the yardstick of the truly Reformed.

As the acronym is apparently no older than the early twentieth century, we must ask ourselves what the pervasive use of this acronym says about those who have utilized and still utilize it. We have not often enough heeded the cautions of those twentieth-century writers who, while embracing or alluding to the TULIP framework, have themselves cautioned us *not* to equate the acronym—or even the doctrines summarized by the acronym—with the Reformed theology itself. When TULIP is used in an exclusionary way, meant to draw the circle tight rather than as a means of rallying evangelical Christians to central pillar principles, a great reversal has taken place among Calvinists who call themselves evangelical. Calling the paraphrasing of Dordt by TULIP a broad-brush approach is arguably too kind. TULIP cannot be allowed to function as a creed.

4. Calvinists take a dim view of revival and awakening.

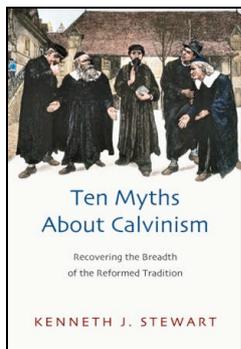
There is an admirable history of religious awakening—both in the sense of the stirring of a lethargic church and in the sense of the rousing of the unconverted—in the Reformed tradition, extending back to the sixteenth century. And, contrary to popular understanding, there were *three* Presbyterian and Reformed responses to the occurrence of revival in the eighteenth century, rather than two, including a “moderate” position ready to defend the authenticity of the awakening in the face of the other two extreme responses.

What are six myths that non-Calvinists should not be circulating, but are?

1. Calvinism is largely antimissionary.

We do not lack early and regular examples of Protestant missionary effort—with Calvinists very prominent in them—as Protestant regions of Europe gradually gained oceanic access in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In the eighteenth century, Lutheran Pietists as well as German Moravians joined this Protestant world-mission effort, which preceded the epoch marked by the departure of William Carey for India in 1793. In light of this prehistory, we may only with qualification go on describing Carey as “the father of modern missions.” It is not an overstatement to say that evangelical zeal combined with Calvinist theology provided the underpinnings of a vast proportion—never the whole, of course—of Protestant missionary expansion in what Kenneth Scott Latourette so wisely called “the great century” of missionary expansion.

AUTHOR Q & A



*Ten Myths About Calvinism:
Recovering the Breadth of
the Reformed Tradition*
Available March 2011
\$24, 255 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-3898-1

2. Calvinism promotes antinomianism.

Antinomianism, a notion entailing “rejection of the moral law as a relevant part of the Christian’s experience” in light of our free justification before God, is an erroneous conception that has appeared at intervals ever since the apostolic era. We find no moral license advocated on the basis of the predestinarian doctrine known to be associated with Calvinism; we find only a tendency in some Calvinists of extreme views to so grossly exaggerate the ineradicable position of Christian believers that the practical obligation to obey God’s laws inside the Christian life has been underemphasized. Mainstream Calvinism has generally been the first to point out this imbalance; it finds in this tendency to antinomianism a perversion of something very valuable, that is, the true fact that the person who is “in Christ” *has* a new position and a new nature.

3. Calvinism leads to theocracy.

The fact of the matter is that for centuries at a time one expression of Christianity *did* demonstrate some theocratic tendencies in the Mediterranean and Western world. When the Protestant Reformation commenced, did Protestantism in general and Calvinism in particular only reassert the theocratic tendencies which Roman Christianity had exhibited in the period up through the fifteenth century? The answer is both no and yes. However, the real danger of theocracy, in any oppressive sense of the term, in the modern world is not associated with countries that have been the strongholds of Christianity, but instead with those that resist both the idea of the coexistence of distinct religions and its counterpart of the freedom to depart from one religion in order to embrace another.

4. Calvinism undermines the creative arts.

The centuries-old complaint that the Reformation dealt a bad hand to the arts contains several layers of confusion and misrepresentation as well as some elements of truth. As the sixteenth century dawned, the Church exercised a virtual domination of art in Western society, with independently wealthy patrons only augmenting the income of artists largely in the employ of the Church. The turnstile through which the Reformation era required the arts to pass in the sixteenth century was, at its root, a requirement for biblical accountability. The application of this principle of fidelity varied in its intensity between Protestant territories that reckoned the arts indifferent, provided that they were exercised chastely, and others that wanted to see the arts governed, as to ecclesiastical use, by biblical precept and precedent.

5. Calvinism resists gender equality.

It is one thing to demonstrate that Calvinism has been associated with certain views on gender; it is another—and more difficult—thing to try to demonstrate that such attitudes *originated* within Calvinism or found their life support in the Reformed tradition as in no other expression of Christianity.

The Reformation-era recovery of the priesthood of all believers—which in principle set men and women on an equal spiritual footing—combined with the newfound zeal to proclaim the

AUTHOR Q & A

Word of God to a population unfamiliar with it, introduced into European Christian life a new momentum. Women as well as men were moved to undertake forms of proclamation. But intervening centuries have not necessarily nurtured these original impulses well. Subsequent periods of spiritual zeal, such as the eighteenth-century awakenings and the rise of the missionary movement in the nineteenth century, have shown the need for crossgender collaboration in the worldwide cause of the gospel to be maintained.

6. Calvinism has fostered racial inequality.

Again, association is not causation. Calvinism no more caused slavery than the preexisting Roman Christianity caused it. But both—in company with virtually every other branch of the Christian movement—had grave difficulty in shaking off this terrible violation of human dignity. Regarding South Africa, the available evidence only warrants us to accept that a certain *strand* of Calvinism was strongly associated with these policies—a strand that faced opposition even within the Reformed denominations, within other Christian churches of South Africa (churches in the Reformed tradition among them), by international bodies of Reformed Churches (the Reformed Ecumenical Synod and World Alliance of Reformed Churches) and by the World Council of Churches. With this explained, no one can credibly argue for a cause-and-effect relation between the Calvinist heritage per se and the views of the South African citizens of Dutch descent and their churches.

What do you hope to see in the future of Calvinism as a movement?

My hope and prayer in writing this volume is that this movement will learn to be more adept at self-criticism, more discerning about who does and does not stand firmly in the movement's mainstream, less characterized by a default tendency to resist cultural change, and even more concerned with reaching our admittedly changed culture with the gospel.