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-Quote

---Thomas Merton

American Church History

---What does Calvin have to do with democracy?

For Christian youth

---10 theological questions they should all know

What does Calvin have to do with democracy?

Believe it or not, Calvin is important to everyone who loves democracy. The case could be made (and I will try to make it) that Calvin had a direct influence on how the US government was shaped and even for the existence of the USA and democracy.

John Calvin lived in the middle of the 1500s in Europe during a time of kings and princes and emperors. But he also lived during the time of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther and Zwingli are two good examples in making the point of this summary. Luther lived in Germany, which had many princes. When Luther initiated his reform in Germany, his prince, Frederick the Wise, joined the movement. This is important: if Frederick had remained Catholic, Luther's reform would have been stopped early on. As long as Luther had this one important person on his side, then his movement grew.

On the other hand, Zwingli lived in Switzerland, which had a different political system: the canton. Think of cantons as small states. Switzerland was ruled not by princes or kings but by the councils of leaders in the cantons. When Zwingli started his reform movement started, he did not have to gain the support of one person (like Luther) but a group of civic leaders.

Now to Calvin. Calvin was born and grew up in France, which had a king. Calvin became involved in the Reformation; unlike Luther and Frederick, though, the king of France remained Catholic. This meant that Calvin had to flee. He ended up in Switzerland in the canton of Geneva which had embraced the Reformation.

Eventually, Calvin became the leader of the Reformation in Geneva. Calvin thrived in this environment of councils, basically a representative government. But remember that this system was only available in Switzerland. The form of church government Calvin established mirrored a more democratic style of leadership.

Then Calvin decided to start a school: the Academy it was called. It attracted a large number of reform-minded students from throughout Europe. One of those was John Knox from Scotland. Knox and Calvin became fast friends, and Knox even stayed in Geneva as a minister. Eventually Knox returned to Scotland where he had a hand in developing the Presbyterian system. Among other unique qualities, the Presbyterians believed in a representative leadership style rather than that practiced in most other Christian groups, which used bishops.

Many Presbyterians came to the developing American colonies. By the 1750s, the Presbyterians formed one of the largest church groups in the colonies. These colonial Presbyterians were mistrustful of leadership by one person, whether a form of church government which involved a bishop, or a form of government which included a king. And, so, the colonial Presbyterians were ripe for a change in government-style from the monarchy of England to a representative government of the new United States of America and made it happen. Thus, John Calvin influenced the form of government of democracy which many countries enjoy today and which other countries are struggling to develop.

Sometimes I would be preoccupied with problems that seemed to be difficult and seemed to be great, and, yet, when it was all over the answers that I worked out did not seem to matter much anyway, because all the while beyond my range of vision and comprehension, God had silently and imperceptibly worked the whole thing out for me, and had presented me with the solution.

Thomas Merton (d. 1968), "The Seven Storey Mountain"

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An important quiz for Christian youth you know

After teaching college-aged students (18-24) and working with several youth groups, I have realized that many of them understand very little about theology.

For example, I taught on the resurrection of Christ in class one day and mentioned that Jesus had always existed. A student I had gotten to know, and who told me she went to church "whenever the doors were open," raised her hand and attempted to correct me. "No, Dr. Nickens, the Father created the son." I assured her that Jesus had always existed since he was God, and she said, "You mean that my pastor has been lying to me all these years? I have heard him say hundreds of times while preaching that Jesus was the son of God." No, I told her, that that language is a metaphor in that the Father is the ideal father who is always right and the Son is the ideal son who always obeys. I later realized that youth were confused on many ideas, and so developed this quiz. Please use this with youth you know to make sure they correctly understand theology! (You might laugh at #8, but I got that question twice. Also many youth miss #3.)

Answer each of these questions with True or False.

1. Jesus is God.
2. The Holy Spirit is God.
3. God the Father created Jesus, who is the Son of God.
4. Jesus was married.
5. Christianity teaches karma.
6. Grace means "not getting the punishment you deserve."
--Answer: This is mercy. Grace means "receiving a gift you don't deserve (like a spiritual gift)."
7. Baptism washes away someone's sins.
8. Since Jesus was raised from the dead, that means he was a zombie.
9. Christians believe in three gods: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
10. Jesus was baptized so that he could become a Christian.