



## Luther and Calvin

In the January 18 *Reformatie*, H. Van Veen called attention to and briefly summarized an extraordinarily interesting study of this subject by Professor W. Van't Spijker.<sup>1</sup> The work of Van't Spijker was a careful investigation to determine in how far John Calvin was a pupil of Martin Luther who went on independently to formulate the Christian doctrines, and in how far he diverged from Luther. While Lutheran scholars tended to stress the differences between the two Reformers, Calvinists tended to stress similarities. Calvin was generally recognized as a faithful pupil of Luther. Peter Meinhold even considered Calvin the greatest and only pupil who really understood the master's deepest intention and expressed it, standing as it were, "*on the shoulders of Luther*" and completing his work, as Luther, in his historical circumstances, had been unable to do it (p.6). Van't Spijker finds plenty of evidence that Luther's influence on Calvin was extensive and permanent.

Calvin's letters indicate that he and Luther apparently never met. The only letter Calvin wrote to Luther, expressing his deep respect for him, never reached Luther because Melancthon (a mutual friend) did not dare to deliver it (p.8)! Although Calvin continued to have this deep respect for Luther, he did not follow him slavishly and regretted Luther's arrogance and vehemence. Yet Calvin said that even if Luther would call him a devil, he would still consider Luther worthy of honor as an outstanding servant of the Lord (p.10)! In the growing conflict about the Lord's Supper Calvin tended to favor Luther rather than the Swiss Reformed leaders, Zwingli and Oecolampadius, whom Luther charged with reducing the Supper to a mere sign. Luther, in turn, gave evidence of mildness toward Calvin and appreciation of some of his writings (p.9), and is reported to have said that if Zwingli and Oecolampadius had expressed themselves as Calvin had done no long controversy would have been necessary (p.11).<sup>2</sup> As the conflict about the Supper intensified, despite differences, Calvin felt that he was more faithful to Luther's line of thought than some of the hostile Lutheran followers, whom he charged with "*aping*" rather than imitating their master (pp. 14, 10).

Luther's influence is found to be clearly apparent in much of Calvin's work. The first edition of the Institutes was patterned in form and contents after Luther's Smaller Catechism, as both deal with Law, Creed, Prayer and Sacraments. In later editions, as Calvin reworked and refined his earlier writing, he showed how that Gospel doctrine that Luther had pointed out must be progressively more carefully and clearly expressed. He saw his role as a similar to that of Luther's (and his) friend, Melancthon, in reworking and refining the evangelical doctrine preached by Luther. We must not (like the Lutheran, Westphal) stop where Luther, the guide, led us, but proceed further in the same path (p.23). We need to progress in the more careful study of God's Word.

Calvin repeatedly defended Luther's writings against Roman Catholic attacks. Van't Spijker finds Calvin's belief in Predestination similar to Luther's. Faced with the question of why some believe the gospel and others do not, Luther traced this back to the secret counsel and will of God, believing in a double predestination. Calvin was his pupil in this also, but further developed the Biblical teaching and defense of this doctrine. Regarding the Lord's Supper, Calvin stressed and more extensively developed the doctrine of the Holy Spirit's work in uniting us with Christ.

Although Calvin felt himself in principle close to Luther, other Calvinists and Lutherans felt that he was mistaken, as the two traditions of the Reformation tended to divide and diverge.

This little study of Calvin's attitude toward Luther, besides illuminating Reformation history, may be helpful to us as we face some comparable problems. An accelerating breakdown of faith and morals, of worship and order, within our churches as well as around them, begins increasingly to

resemble that which four centuries ago drove our Reformed fathers to protest in the Protestant Reformation. At the bottom of the multitude of distressing problems, now as then, there was a neglect (and sometimes perversion) of the Word of God and its doctrines which were supposed to unite and motivate Christians under what we still call "*forms of unity*." In our plight we are being forced, like those fathers, to relearn from the Word of God what we must believe and do, and to refuse to follow or support those who reject that guide as out-of-date. Loyalty to the Lord's Word drives us inevitably towards separation from those who reject it (Acts 19:9; 18:6, 7; 2 Corinthians 6:24-7:1). In that difficult situation it is just as urgent that we work and pray for as close a unity as possible, within and across traditional lines, with all those who love the Lord and His Word. Among the Reformers, especially Calvin provided a remarkable example of doing exactly that. More than his colleagues we see him attempt to bridge national, cultural and personal obstacles, "*endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Ephesians 4:3). Undoubtedly this attitude contributed greatly to his influence in many countries and churches as he became the Bible teacher of the Reformation and his Institutes became its textbook. His school, established in Swiss Geneva, drew students from all Europe and England, demonstrating as well as teaching, that differences of birth, race and culture were unimportant to those who sought to know and serve our Lord and His Word. That lesson is one of those that today's Christians may profitably learn from him.

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<sup>1</sup> *De Reformatie* is a weekly among the (Liberated) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The book reviewed is Professor W. Van't Spijker's *Luther en Calvin*, De invloed van Luther op Calvin blijktens de Institutie, Apeldoornse Studies: N. 20, Kampen 1985, (40pp.). The writer is a professor at the seminary of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, which are affiliated with the Free Reformed Churches in the US and Canada.

<sup>2</sup> In 1529 Luther met with the Swiss Reformers in an extended conference at Marburg in effort to resolve their differences regarding the Lord's Supper. In the long debate Luther stressed the Lord's words, "*This is my body*." Zwingli and his friends stressed the Lord's answer to the question in John 6:52, "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" "*The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life*" (v.63). Near the end of the long debate, which sometimes became heated, Zwingli asked Luther to forgive his bitterness, saying, "*I have always desired your friendship a great deal, and I want it still* (with tears in his eyes). *There are no others in Italy and France I would rather see*." Luther replied, "*Call upon God that you may receive understanding*." Oecolampadius retorted, "*Call upon him yourself, for you need it just as much as we!*" (*Great Debates of the Reformation*, Donald J. Ziegler, p. 105). Thus Christians like ourselves struggled with the difficulties of seeking church unity.