



I Crave Freedom but I Pray for Providence...

I once heard it suggested that the study of Church History was mostly focused on two themes, namely doctrine and church government. Initially the characterisation impressed me. It seemed a wonderful coat hanger on which to hang all the different events and activities that fill the pages of our Church History books and Church History lessons. If we consider the Great Reformation of the 16th century, the suggestion seems to fit quite well. Discussions and debates centred on the doctrine of salvation and the position of the pope and other hierarchical positions in relation to governing the church.

Over time I started to wonder, however, if this suggestion was more of a caricature than a characterisation. Christ's activity in gathering, defending and preserving for himself a church, is surely far more than major disagreements over matters of doctrine and struggles over how the church is to be governed. Of concern in this suggestion is that Church History is less about how Christ works out his plan with real people in real life situations.

As a child I learned much about Church History from historical fiction. I experienced the events of the day through the lives of the fictional characters. I learned about the discussions and debates that took place through the activity and dialogue of normal people. Later in life I developed an appreciation for biographies and have read a number about Martin Luther and John Calvin. I was affirmed in the conclusion that Christ's work with real people in real situations is a central element of Church History and a very instructive one too.

Herman Selderhuis followed this approach to write a biography on John Calvin, a central figure in the Great Reformation. He begins by saying:

Life is a steeplechase; there are dangers everywhere, and God himself, who has put most of the obstacles in our way, watches to see whether we make it over them. Such is John Calvin's view of life — and of God (2009, p.7).

A little further on he provides a broad description up Calvin's life and he states:

Calvin runs the race of this life, falling, all the while, picking himself up again and again, and looking forward to the finish ... The race wears him out ... Calvin stays on the course in faith that the God who makes the race so difficult also secures the runner's finish. (2009, p.7)

It's an interesting and thought provoking way of describing someone's life. It somehow hints at the contrariness of our will as it interacts with God's will and the manner in which God works out his will in the life of a believer. A careful study of Calvin's life indicates time and again that his own desires and wishes in relation to his life were not always immediately aligned with the course on which God directed his steps.

Calvin wanted things to be otherwise, but he had no choice. This is his greatest problem: there is so much he wants to do, but cannot. He wants to be free but God always stands in the way. As so many others then and now have also seen, Calvin seems to be aware that even his own character is often only another obstacle in his way. Calvin pleads for freedom, but prays for providence (2009, pp 7, 8).

What does it mean when we crave for freedom, but pray for providence. Freedom is about being unrestrained; it is about doing what we want to do, it is about throwing off the shackles that come in the form of restrictions that bind us and that pin us down. It's about doing that which we like to do;

indulging ourselves and following our own directions. So, when John Calvin was accosted by an angry Guillaume Farel of Geneva to forget the quiet life of study and of writing, and to take on a pastoral task in the city of Geneva, he rebelled against that thought. No way! Give up what I love doing and come here and be a minister. Calvin couldn't bear the thought!

Acting in accordance with providence, on the other hand, is letting God's will prevail in your life. It is acknowledging that the things we want and the things that we do, can often be selfish; we are often looking for the easiest way, the most comfortable approach and the most exciting course for ourselves. We are not always seeking the best for those around us, let alone that we are always seeking the best for the LORD. There's my way and the LORD's way; my way, unlike God's way, is often rooted in my sinful and self-centred nature. God's way is about putting the LORD first and about seeking his honour. God's way is about considering others before me. Calvin was mindful of that and he accepted that. Though he craved in his heart the freedom to do his own thing, he continued to pray for providence so that he would do God's thing. That's why he went to Geneva, even though he didn't want to go. That's why later on he went back to Geneva a second time, even though he knew that it would be really difficult and he really didn't want to.

It seems to me that this phenomenon of craving freedom is not limited to John Calvin. I have a sense that the life of most believers is such that they crave freedom. The restraint to live where we do, the call to work for a living, the imposition to attend church and to contribute to it, and the limitations brought about by family responsibilities are but some examples, that as adult believers we might like to escape from. The requirement to submit to parents, the law that requires children to attend school, and the pressure to be faithful and discerning in relation to lifestyle choices, are matters that young people will sometimes rail against. Our society and our time is characterised by freedom and believers are not immune to the lure of it.

On all sides we are hemmed in, it seems. God's word directs us to forego and to forsake many of the things that we might desire. God's law directs our heart and sets boundaries on our conduct and they go against what we might personally favour. The laws of our nation constrain us in exercising our will. We have established ways of doing things in our churches and the wheels of change, even if it is improvement, turn so slowly. If you are attending school, there are school rules and protocols to direct and contain you, often against what you prefer to be doing. There are even people set in positions of authority, such as the elders, parents, teachers and police officers to force our compliance.

Our lot may also include that we have limited resources to pursue the life of our dreams. Sometimes our bodies let us down and our health gets in the way. Calvin knew about that. He endured many hardships in the course of his life. Travel was wearisome and dangerous, as he evaded his persecutors. His workload was heavy and burdensome and his health suffered terribly as a result of this. We may also have to endure the animosity of brothers and sisters or the acrimony of people in the world against us. Calvin was no stranger to that either. Though a great reformer, he was not always popular and well thought of.

So, as we crave for freedom, it's good to pray for providence. For it's good to be content with where you live. It's good too, to work and to work hard. It brings a blessing to others and also to yourself. It's good to have a day of rest at the start of every week and to attend church. Being active as a member is also positive; other members benefit from it and so do you. It's especially good to be there where church life is faithful to God's Word, even if it curtails me in my personal preferences. Family is good too; there's wonderful nurture and support to be had in family and the rewards to those who indulge in family are wonderful and many.

It's good to go to a reformed school, it's good to do homework and to study! Calvin was an avid student and he used his learning to benefit thousands of people. The lifestyle choices that we sometimes crave bring about much misery; there's no integrity in pursuing them.

So, Calvin learnt that real freedom lies in being content with God's providence. At the conclusion of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, written by John Calvin, is a section called *One Hundred*

Aphorisms. An aphorism is a concise statement that summarises a key area of teaching. In the section on Christian living Calvin summarises as follows:

Aphorism 50:

The sum of the Christian life is self-denial.

Aphorism 51:

The ends of this self-denial are four.

1. *that we may devote ourselves to God as a living sacrifice.*
2. *That we may not seek our own things, but those which belong to God and to our neighbour.*
3. *That we may patiently bear the cross, the fruits of which are — acknowledgement of our weakness, the trial of our patience, correction of faults, more earnest prayer and more cheerful meditation on eternal life.*
4. *That we may know in what manner we ought to use the present life and its aids for necessity and delight. Necessity demands that we possess all things as though we possessed them not; that we bear poverty with mildness and abundance with moderation; that we know how to endure patiently fullness and hunger, and want; that we pay regard to our neighbour, because we must give account of our stewardship; and that all things correspond to our calling (1972, p. 683).*

Appreciate how much more we have here than just debate about doctrine and church government, important as these matters are. Church History as seen through the lens of how Christ works in and through people, leading them to powerful conclusions about God and life with God, brings it very close. We may live 500 years after Calvin, but the lesson gleaned from his struggles to pray for providence whilst craving freedom, is as poignant as ever.

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