

**Unity in Essentials: American Calvinism and the EPC**  
**Eph. 4:1-16, ESV**

Next month on July 10<sup>th</sup> Reformed Christians around the world celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth. The young French scholar, who at 26 years of age reluctantly became leader of the Reforming Church in Geneva, certainly had no idea that his spiritual progeny would be a global faith which continues to proliferate five centuries after his birth.

In Calvin's lifetime, his keen insights into Scripture would begin to influence Protestant thinkers in Switzerland, France, Germany, the Netherlands and England and Scotland as well. Calvinism, as an international expression of Christian faith would eventually claim millions of adherents. One could argue that Calvin's most profound influence would be in the New World; English Puritans, Dutch Reformed, French Huguenots and Scots-Irish Presbyterians transported Calvin's theology and political ideas into a new continent where they would flourish. Calvinism would take on a uniquely American character in the New World context.

When one thinks of John Calvin's legacy in America today it seems that Reformed Churches have been long surpassed by the Baptists and Methodists. Under Francis Asbury the Methodist circuit riders literally left the Presbyterians in the dust. There is a story about one of the Presbyterian evangelists on the frontier who stopped at an Inn for the night. The innkeeper suspecting he was a clergyman, asked if he was a Methodist or a Presbyterian. The minister replied: Why do you ask? The keeper said: I just wondered what to expect; I have observed that the Methodist ministers when they stop in here are mainly concerned about the care for their horses. The Presbyterians just care having good food to eat and a suitable bed to sleep in. So what are you? The minister replied: I'm a Presbyterian but my horse is a Methodist.

Long term, Presbyterians would not have a huge presence in America compared with some of the other denominations but there is still quite a draw to Reformed Theology in the US. On the cover of Time Magazine just three months ago (March 23, 2009) was this headline: *10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now*. Down in the corner was a list of the ten ideas which included economics, ecology, transportation, medicine; and then a real shocker – one item that made the top ten list – The New Calvinism. Inside the magazine was an article on the New Calvinism by David Van Biema – leave it to a Dutch guy to bring up Calvinism!

In the article, Van Biema declared "Calvinism is back" and is now "Evangelicalism's latest success story." He listed the popular preachers associated with the new Calvinism – John Piper, Mark Driscoll and Albert Mohler; he also mentioned the new "Calvinist-flavored ESV Study Bible," contemporary Christian music that is Reformed as well as popular Reformed blogs. One of the books mentioned in the piece is a recent one by *Christianity Today* journalist Collin Hansen, entitled *Young, Restless and Reformed*. Hansen's book is fascinating as it draws attention to how college students around the country are being drawn to Reformed Theology because it provides some substantive answers to life's questions; it's a meaty Christianity that is soul-satisfying. Apparently a lot of young Christian adults are tired of the Evangelical fluff. Well, maybe Calvin is getting a birthday present after all.

Tonight, I've been asked to direct our attention to the past and ask the question: how does our Christian past inform the future of the EPC? We certainly want to draw attention to Calvin's legacy on his 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary but I also want to reflect on Calvinism in America which is the immediate historical context

for our ministry. And, I'd like us to consider our own unique heritage of 28 years in the EPC. Some of you may be wondering if Calvin really has anything relevant to say. Well, admittedly there is a lot of junk in the ash heap of history but as one historian aptly stated: "Wisdom is learning to take from the altar of the past, the fire not the ashes." I think there is some good fire here for us.

As a historian, I'm a storyteller or someone might say a professional gossip – I get paid to talk about other people. Tonight, I want to weave together three stories – that of Calvin, the Colonial Presbyterians who established Presbyterianism in our country and I want to consider the EPC story. Of course, these stories are all part of the Big Story, the story of God's people, the Church. And what better place in Scripture to look than Ephesians chapter 4. May the Holy Spirit encourage us as we journey into the past and consider what He's done in history and what He may do among us in the future.

### I. Unity in Essentials

St. Paul in Ephesians chapter 4 writes these words:

Vs. 4-6: ***There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***

Paul's emphasis in these verses is our unity in the body of Christ. Seven times he mentions Christian "oneness" in these verses: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. This oneness we share in Christ's body, the Church, is a spiritual reality established by the work of the one Spirit in each believer; by one baptism that spiritual reality is sealed unto us. And we share one Lord Jesus Christ and one common faith that unites us.

Note the Trinitarian emphasis here: one Spirit, one Lord (Jesus Christ) and one Father of all. Calvin points out that even the mention of baptism in this passage points to the Trinity – for one is baptized in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If there is one doctrine that marks Christianity, it is the Trinity – a truth for which the Church battled long and hard in the early centuries. Our unity as Christians is in the truth. As divided as the body of Christ is outwardly, there is a core of essential truth claims that bind us all together. Apart from affirming those central truths, there is no genuine profession of faith. The Church Fathers called this the "rule of faith" and it was encapsulated in that most ancient confession of faith, the Apostles Creed – which Luther called "the gospel."

The Apostles Creed was reiterated and expanded in the great Creed of Nicaea which has stood the test of centuries as the definitive Christian statement on the Trinity. There are clear truth claims in these ancient creeds about the person and work of Christ. The spiritual oneness we share in Christ is based upon theological content, the truth about Christ, his person and his work on our behalf; truth that is recorded in Holy Scripture. Teaching these central beliefs of the faith was Calvin's lifetime agenda in 16<sup>th</sup> C. Geneva because he believed it was widespread ignorance of the ancient faith that had sent the Medieval Church into its collective theological tailspin.

Creeds and confessions were of vital importance to Calvin, especially the Apostles Creed. He integrated the Apostles Creed into the Geneva liturgy where it was sung. Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) when he was only 26, included a large section on the exposition of the Apostles Creed. His *Instruction in Faith* (catechism) of 1537 contained a section entitled "The Symbol of the Faith" where Calvin took each portion of the Apostles Creed and explained it to the children. Calvin said of the Apostles Creed, "It contains no human doctrine. On the contrary, it is a collection of very certain testimonies of the Scripture."

Calvin also saw the place for larger Confessions; he wrote the *French Confession* (Gallican Confession) in 1559 to provide a statement of faith for the persecuted Huguenots. The Dutch, German, and Swiss Reformed Churches would continue to write confessions and catechisms. The Scottish Presbyterians produced the *Scots Confession* and the English Puritans gave us our own *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*. Unfortunately, some of these more expanded statements of faith produced no little dissention because it was more difficult to have everyone on the same page and being good Protestants some were always suspicious of these longer creeds being substituted for the final authority of Scripture. One thing is clear, all the Reformed churches, following Calvin, believed that doctrinal truth matters and Christian unity is founded in the truth. And it's noteworthy that every one of the Reformed confessions and catechisms recited the essentials of the Apostles/Nicene Creed as well as Calvinistic distinctives. Basic belief like the Trinity is bedrock and is non-negotiable for Christians. Yet, it is under constant attack from many directions today. (Story about JW and Trinity) Some doctrine's are essential to genuine Christianity no matter how much some people don't like them.

When the earliest colonial settlers and clergyman of the Presbyterian persuasion came to the New World there was an assumed consensus on the essential elements of their shared faith. In fact, when Presbyterians, under Francis Makemie, first organized themselves into the first Presbytery in America (1706) they adopted no creed or confession. The Christian and Calvinistic heritage was such an integral element of who they were it didn't even cross their minds that they needed a public statement of shared beliefs.

But, 20 years later (now with several Presbyteries) there had been some disciplinary issues and the Synod proceeded to consider the adoption of the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*. The move to adopt the Westminster Standards stirred up quite a controversy, some ministers were convinced it would split the young church. Many Presbyterians resisted the move to officially adopt the Confession because they knew adopting the Confession had produced division back in the old country, especially in Ireland and Scotland.

So what did they do? They did what Presbyterians always do - they formed a committee to study the issue. And what they produced was the famous Adopting Act compromise of 1729. The heart of the compromise was the phrase "essential and necessary articles" a phrase which occurred five times in the Adopting Act itself. Henceforth, Presbyterian clergy would be required to declare their agreement with the Confession and Catechisms "*in all the essential and necessary articles.*" And ministers were allowed to have scruples "*about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government.*" In the preamble to the 1729 Adopting Act, the Colonial Presbyterians stated why it was necessary to have a formal creed: "*we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity.*"

Now to our story: the EPC in 1981 followed the counsel of our colonial fathers by affirming the Westminster Standards as the confession of our faith. And we reaffirmed the Adopting Act principle – there are essentials of Reformed faith in the creed that are non-negotiable and there are other issues that are non-essential. The EPC also chose to include in our modern language version of Westminster the two additional chapters from the early 20<sup>th</sup> C. – a chapter on the Holy Spirit and missions. This is significant for us because, while American Calvinism has historically had a simultaneous commitment to Reformation doctrine and spreading the gospel at home and abroad, Presbyterians had not collectively stated that confessionally until they first added the chapter on "The Gospel of the Love of God and Missions" to the Westminster Confession in 1903. When the EPC included this chapter, we were making

a clear statement – we are the EVANGELICAL Presbyterian Church, and we intend to be both Reformed and missional. What we believe does matter

Now more than ever it is imperative that we hold fast to our unity in essentials. Contrary to popular opinion in much of American Christianity, doctrine does matter. Elder statesman of evangelicalism, Chuck Colson in his new book, *The Faith*, has issued a wake-up call to church about the neglect and overall ignorance of the essential doctrines of the faith among us. Colson illustrates this by pointing to statistics on biblical illiteracy, acceptance of the myth that all religions are alike and increasing confusion in sexual ethics among Christian young people and adults. Ultimately, it comes down to the question of truth and the authority of Scripture. Colson says: “I believe that the question of truth and its knowability is the most important single issue for the Church and perhaps for the culture today.”

Our EPC fathers and mothers wisely addressed this issue from the beginning. In addition to adopting Westminster, the EPC founders wrote a brief irenic statement of historic evangelicalism which we call “Essentials of Our Faith.” The key issues as they saw it were truth and biblical authority, the very things Colson is talking about. This was the original first sentence of the *Essentials*: “All Scripture is self-attesting, and being truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life to the authority of the infallible Word of God.” Brethren, we will live or die on that hill. Can someone say “Amen.”

## II. Varieties of Ministry

After Paul emphasized the Christian unity of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, he further reminded the Ephesian Church that in the one body of Christ there are a variety of ministry gifts or offices. Paul says, Vs. 7, 11-13: ***But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift . . . And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.***

The offices listed in the text all revolve around the speaking or teaching gifts – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. In other words, the gift of Christ to his Church is the ministry of the Word. Calvin says: “The government of the church, by the ministry of the Word, is not a contrivance of men, but an appointment made by the Son of God. . . . to Christ we owe it that we have ministers of the gospel.” Next time you ruling elders get mad at the preacher, you remember it’s Jesus’ fault. He’s the one who gave preachers and teachers to the Church.

For my purposes, I’m not interested in a long discussion of what these offices mean – do we still have apostles or prophets today? Is there one office of pastor-teacher or are there two distinct offices? (Calvin believed they were two distinct offices). The main point is that each of these gifts/offices is a gift of Christ and yet they are very unique ministries. Calvin says: “out of this variety arises unity in the church, as the various tones produce sweet melody.” Unfortunately, however, what too often happens in the wake of diversity of gifts and ministries is not sweet harmony but a cacophony of noise that gives one an ecclesiastical headache.

Calvin witnessed this in the 16<sup>th</sup> C. as Protestants turned on one another. Much of Calvin’s energy was spent trying to bring some kind of unity to the disgruntled Protestant movement. Calvin gave concerted effort to bridge building; his correspondence is full of his charitable spirit as he gave advice and shared affectionate relationships with Reformers all over Europe and England. He reached out to Zurich and worked with Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor, to achieve compromise on the Lord’s Supper. He was close

friends with Luther's successor, Philip Melancthon; together, Calvin and Melancthon met with Roman Catholic theologians attempting to find points of agreement. Sadly, after Calvin, a sectarian spirit among Protestants would get even worse.

Let's turn to the Colonial Presbyterian story again. The American Calvinists lived during an exciting time in our nation's history – I'm referring to that great visitation of the Spirit upon the American colonies. Within a decade of the Adopting Act, Presbyterian preachers were seeing multitudes come to Christ as the Great Awakening reached its peak in 1740. The mass conversions and the great show of emotion that accompanied the revival, raised some traditional Presbyterian eyebrows but a number of the younger Presbyterian ministers were right in the thick of it as some of the foremost evangelists of the Awakening.

A leader of the Presbyterian revivalists (called New Side) was Gilbert Tennent of New Jersey. As an awakening preacher Tennent advocated "preaching the terrors" that is, he confronted people with the miseries of the sinful state and terrors of an offended deity in his appeal for them to seek forgiveness in Christ. When George Whitefield came to the Middle Colonies in 1739 he sought out Gilbert Tennent and the two became fast friends. Whitefield was so impressed with Tennent, that he later asked Gilbert to follow him in a preaching tour through New England. This is what Whitefield said of Gilbert Tennent's preaching: "He convinced me more and more that we can preach the Gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts . . . Hypocrites must either soon be converted or enraged at his preaching. He is a son of thunder, and does not fear the faces of men." (Story of minister with a gun)

Tennent and his revivalist brethren became a lightning rod for controversy in the Presbyterian Church. Because of their links to Whitefield they came under the same fire that he received. In addition, the Presbyterian revivalists invaded other pastor's pulpits without permission and they encouraged church members to leave those churches if they weren't being spiritually fed. Traditionalists shot back by questioning revivalists' education (the Log College); and they criticized revivalist ministry practice as "unscriptural, antipresbyterial and uncharitable." One event that brought things to a head was a published sermon by Gilbert Tennent entitled, "The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry." Tennent referred to his anti-revival Presbyterian brethren as "Pharisee teachers, natural men and unconverted ministers." He accused them of not preaching the "nature-humbling doctrines" of Calvinism; and because of this, they are responsible for the spread of Arminianism, Arianism and Deism throughout the world.

Well, those are some severe charges. Things got really nasty as the dissent spiraled out of control and tragically, in the midst of one of the great movements of God in our nation, the Presbyterians split. The revivalists were excised from the church and told they were no longer welcome. The Split came in 1741, just a year after Whitefield's most successful year in America. In essence it was a split over ministry practice – the traditionalists didn't like the way revivalists were carrying on their evangelistic work; and the revivalists judged their opponents as hindering the work of God, even suggesting they may not even be Christians. Christian charity went out the window. The unity of the faith, that toward which the ministry gifts are directed (verse 13), would be elusive for the colonial Presbyterians.

What about the EPC story? Differences over ministry practice can still cause great tension sometimes even becoming an essential element of denominational fellowship – those who don't share our view aren't welcome. One of the ministry practice issues that divided Presbyterians in the 20<sup>th</sup> C. was the ordination of women. In the last half century Presbyterians and other Protestants began debating the

issue. In the minds of some conservatives, the church's affirmation of women's ordination got inextricably connected with the demise of biblical authority, theological liberalism and radical feminism which was *damaging it's witness to the Gospel*. In the final analysis this does not necessarily follow. We live in a time when many evangelicals are open to women serving in church office not because they are *sidelined by appeals to cultural developments* but they are genuinely convinced Scripture supports this. Some conservatives have lost all perspective on these things. One of the founding fathers of a sister Presbyterian body once lamented to me that too many of his brethren have put their opposition to women's ordination right up there next to the doctrine of the Trinity in importance.

I've seen the dogmatic attitude on the other side too. I remember sitting in seminary class and having the stated clerk of the PCUS tell us: "those who do not believe in women's ordination are not welcome in our denomination." Being a young, foolish seminarian in my 20's, I wrote him a letter the next day, telling him I thought he was full of it. I told him there are hundreds of ministers in the church that have always held the traditional view and it is crime for you to tell them they are no longer welcome in the church they have served for decades. That was almost 30 years ago. As a traditionalist (on this issue) I was made to feel like a second class citizen in the mainline church and I was expected to keep my mouth shut. I thought the whole attitude was preposterous – you're telling me that the historic Christian position from ancient times is no longer welcome in the Church?

What we've ended up with is Presbyterian bodies (on both sides) who made one's position on women's ordination a litmus test of denominational fellowship. A gift of the EPC was to boldly carve out middle ground by declaring that women's ordination is a non-essential issue. We decided to get off the merry-go-round and rid ourselves of the dizziness of debating this thing till Jesus comes back. The longer I live, I see the wisdom of our EPC founders. There are many things I love about our denomination but the generous EPC spirit about the women's issue has been one of the most pleasing to me in my 18 years in our church. There are things worth being dogmatic about and there are other things, though important, that are not worthy grounds for maintaining a sectarian spirit. Honestly, I think the EPC has been a great light on this issue to the other Reformed bodies.

Of course, there are numerous other areas where we have a significant variety of ministry practices within the EPC. In my Presbytery, (Mid-Atlantic) we've got traditional churches, seeker churches, a self-identified emergent church and charismatic churches. Churches are involved in all kinds of ministry and worship styles. You would think this is a recipe for unabated conflict but it has been amazing to observe how we have learned not just to tolerate one another but actually come to celebrate our diversity – not in mere ecclesiastically-correct public statements but a genuinely heartfelt appreciation for one another and the contribution each one makes to the Kingdom.

### III. Walk Worthy of the Calling

There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism yet a variety of ministries, all which are gifts from Christ to his people. In order to preserve the unity that Christ asks of us, there are some things we've got to commit to. Paul begins Ephesians 4 with these words:

Vs. 1,2, 3: ***I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***

Paul tells the Ephesians to show forbearance to one another in love. Being joined in this one body, with one faith has some implications for our common life together. St. Paul gives this urgent plea: walk worthy of your calling. Then he defines what it means to walk in a worth manner; it means to put the

brethren before yourself. Here are the characteristics, the apostle extols: humility, gentleness (meekness), patience, forbearance in love. And be eager to maintain this unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace. Far too often peace is absent in the church. Everyone is demanding his or her own way and this unity we're supposed to have in Christ, is elusive.

Calvin understood this reality in his own experience in Geneva and dealing with Christian brethren throughout Europe. By Calvin's day (as a second generation Reformer) Christian Europe was a disaster as groups condemned and persecuted one another. Caspar Schwenckfeld, an Anabaptist leader, in 1537, described the religious scene this way: "The Catholics damn the Lutherans, the Lutherans damn the Zwinglians, the Zwinglians damn the Anabaptists, and the Anabaptists damn everybody else." There wasn't a lot of love being passed around among Protestants.

Calvin's perspective on the lack of love over differences in doctrine and practice was to exercise moderation. On theological tensions Calvin said this: "We must exercise moderation; so as not instantly to declare every man to be a heretic who does not agree with our opinion. There are some matters on which Christians may differ from each other, without being divided into sects." On the level of the individual, the berating of fellow Christians was ultimately about selfishness according to Calvin. He observed: "Whence come rudeness, pride, and disdainful language towards brethren? Whence come quarrels, insults, and reproaches? Come they not from this, that every one carries his love of himself, and his regard to his own interests, to excess? By laying aside haughtiness and a desire of pleasing ourselves, we shall become meek and gentle, and acquire that moderation of temper which will overlook and forgive many things in the conduct of our brethren."

Colonial Presbyterians learned about moderation the hard way – it took a bitter division to teach them the lesson. Not long after the split over the Great Awakening, there emerged a sense that the schism was a public scandal; it was a terrible witness and undermined their credibility as Christians. Almost immediately there were attempts to mend the breach, initiated from the revivalists side. In time, the walls began to crumble and the Presbyterian family of churches in America were reunited in 1758. On the occasion of their reunion, the Rev. Gilbert Tennent was selected as moderator, the New Side minister who had hurled such abuse as his Old Side brothers was chosen to lead the reunited church. Gilbert Tennent had become a peacemaker. In his youthful exuberance he had said some cruel things about his fellow Presbyterian ministers but he publically repented of his censorious spirit against his brethren.

One of the Old Side ministers was asked to preach at the 1758 reunion Synod meeting. He chose as his passage of Scripture, Eph. 4. The minister was Francis Allison, co-pastor of First Presbyterian in Philadelphia. In his sermon to the reunited Presbyterians he said this: "We must maintain union in essentials, forbearance in lesser matters, and charity in all things....In promoting and preserving peace and unity among Christians, we are carefully to follow the commands and example of Christ and his apostles; and not the expedients of our own devising...We should remember, that no two men are all agreed in all points; and that where they are agreed, they generally differ in their ways of explaining and defending them...in a church like ours in America, collected from different churches of Europe, who have followed different modes and ways of obeying the 'great and general command of the gospel,' there is a peculiar call for charity and forbearance."

As far as I know, this is the first time our EPC motto shows up in American Presbyterian records. It's worthy of note, that the context for the popular saying was when Presbyterians had decided to follow a path of moderation and practice charity toward one another within the same ecclesiastical body. Words

have meaning; Allison's comment about union in essentials, forbearance in lesser matters and charity in all things was more than a clichéd maxim to which everyone could nod their heads. No, it was an exhortation to live out their Presbyterian connectionalism with a moderate spirit of accommodation to one another for the sake of Christian unity. Allison told his brothers – if we do this, we will be following the example of Christ and the Apostles. Allison's words do certainly seem to emulate the principles that Paul lays out in Ephesians 4.

What Paul, Calvin and Allison point to is that we've got to put our own personal interests in second place behind the interests of others – how un-American, but how Christian! We're talking about self-denial, which Calvin, by the way, said is the essence of the Christian life. We're talking about submitting to one another. How many times does St. Paul speak about putting others first, looking out for others interests, submitting to one another in the pages of the New Testament. Denying self is one of the most important things we're called to do, yet one of the most difficult to carry out. This is especially true when it comes to submitting to one another. One of the ordination vows that every elder (ruling or teaching, male or female) in this Assembly has answered in the affirmative is: "Do you promise subjection to your fellow Presbyters in the Lord.?" I believe it is this vow above all the others that will enable us to safeguard the true meaning of our beloved EPC motto – that we will distinguish between essentials and non-essentials and show love towards one another always. We all affirmed the vow to submit but it's another matter to live it out in our churches and presbyteries.

Probably many of you, if you're like me, are a bit cynical about this submission thing. We are all self-centered beings that typically are most concerned about looking out for number one. Ministers, elders, church members typically seem to self absorbed, only really caring about what's going in their ministry and basically want Presbytery not to bother them – much less submit to their fellow Presbyters. One poignant example of this in my EPC experience was when a handful of brothers went to confront one of our tall steeple preachers about an issue (about something blatantly out of line) and within two weeks Presbytery was notified that the church was leaving the denomination. We got the message: we're going to do what we want to do and we're certainly not accountable to you. The minister and elders basically told us to take an ecclesiastical hike.

On the other hand, in my almost two decades as an EPC minister I have observed the fleshing out of self denial and submission in numerous ways in my own presbytery but one occasion stands out. The pastor of one of the largest churches in the Presbytery had formal charges brought against him by a member of his congregation. The chair of the commission stood before Presbytery holding a huge binder that contained all the data submitted in the charges. He discreetly described the nature of the charges which sounded outrageous. I thought, boy, I bet this minister is hot having to put up with this mess. Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw the accused minister move toward the microphone; we all braced ourselves, thinking here it comes; we're going to get an earful – I expected to him to say, "this is unjust, this a waste to time, what is this a witch hunt?" But, this is what he said: "I want you all to know that I submit to this process and I submit to the judgment of this Presbytery." I remember being shocked and thinking: he gets it; he trusts his fellow Presbyters and he is submitting to his brethren. I was blown away because that attitude is so rare in our day. Here was an honorable man that meant every word of his ordination vow. I guarantee you, his elders got the message too – this commitment to the other churches in our Presbytery is serious business.

Conclusion

The Time magazine article on the “New Calvinism” sweeping the country ends with an acknowledgment that Calvinism is sometimes perceived as arrogant and divisive. Van Biema concludes his essay with this sentence: “Calvin’s 500<sup>th</sup> birthday will be this July. It will be interesting to see whether Calvin’s latest legacy will be classic Protestant backbiting. . .” May it not be so, for as Francis Schaeffer pointed out years ago, bitter division among Christians gave the world the right to disbelieve the Gospel. As we look to the future, being missional demands that we practice moderation just as Calvin prescribed.

I think the colonial Presbyterians set a great example for us. They realized that their schism was a public scandal and a horrible witness in the midst of the Great Awakening. And further, they realized they needed each other. Left to themselves both parties tended toward extremes but together they moderated one another’s weaknesses and utilized each other’s strengths. One signal of this new charitable attitude was the joint statement they issued at the reunion Synod on the importance of both godliness and orthodox doctrine. The Synod said: “. . . we unanimously declar[e] [our] Serious and fixed Resolution, by divine Aid, to take heed to ourselves, that our hearts be upright, our Discourse edifying, and our Lives exemplary for Purity and Godliness – to take heed to our Doctrine, that it be not only orthodox, but evangelical & Spiritual . . .”

I remember as a seminary student sitting in Dr. Andy Jumper’s office in St. Louis and speaking with him about the church. I remember a comment he made, he said “Presbyterians are a moderate people.” My own study of American Presbyterianism has confirmed that judgment. There’s this kind of “sacred middle ground” that has sustained the best of American Calvinism for 300 years. This moderate spirit captures Calvin’s spirit and it’s the accumulated wisdom of our Presbyterian forbearers that has passed down to us. The EPC has tried to capture the best of that spirit. Luder Whitlock, the former President of RTS, publically stated on several occasions that “the EPC is a model of Presbyterianism.” I humbly agree with him.

If there’s a phrase that I think characterizes the EPC on the Reformed spectrum of churches, it would be “Moderate Calvinism.” We do find ourselves in the middle between more conservative Reformed bodies and the wide-open almost anything goes mainline Reformed churches. On one hand, we represent a kinder, gentler Calvinism; on the other hand, we are biblical Calvinists that believe Scripture gives us the last word, not culture and not even our heritage.

Maintaining that middle ground takes some effort. We’ve worked on it for 28 years. We worked through the charismatic issue, the women’s issue, our relationship to the Westminster Confession, differences over worship and ministry philosophy. We’ve all got strong feelings about these things but on the whole the EPC Spirit has been to trust each other, speak well of fellow elders, and show charity in attitude and action. We’ve not done it perfectly but we’ve tried awfully hard to live up to our motto: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things charity.”

As we continue to write the EPC story in the next 30 years, let’s listen to our past. Our Calvinist and Presbyterian past shouts in our ears: don’t ever forsake the truth of God’s Word, and be eager to preserve unity; if we ever abandon either of these, we will end up on the ash heap of history. I salute Dr. Calvin tonight; I’m grateful for the Colonial brethren that birthed our American church and I thank God for the EPC, that place many of us joyfully call HOME.