

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
“Today’s Big Birthday Boy”
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You didn’t get your invitation to the birthday party? No? Well, here’s your invitation. You can still come to the party. It’s today. I’m hoping they’ll be cake. You don’t even have to bring a birthday present. After all, the birthday boy has been dead for over four centuries. Today, July 10th, the world celebrates John Calvin’s 500th birthday.

We should say, “thank you” for the presents he has given us. What presents? How about the gift of the United States? Sadly, nobody mentioned his name last week during our July 4th parties. Yet, when you read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, you read documents his quiet scholarship and soaring imagination conceived.

Funny thing too, because he was a theologian. Well, maybe not so funny. Theology undergirds all thinking. How you understand your place and purpose in life informs and determines all you do: economics, science, art, literature, politics.

Our birthday boy was especially fond of politics. You get a taste of it in my Calvinistic denomination. Other denominations label the priesthood or professional ministry as holy callings. Calvin appreciated the role of pastors, despite himself never being ordained. He remained a lawyer and teacher, a true Doctor. In my church, which is the highest calling a person can receive from providence? Which is the most respected profession to which a person can be called to serve? A politician. What could be nobler than to enter government work and seek the public good (all, not some). Merit rather than birthright or wealth ought determine who bears the burden and responsibility of promoting the civic welfare. Let the best rise up to rule. This is why I as pastor have no church authority except to insure proper preaching and right administration of the sacraments. Authority instead is vested in persons elected by the congregation who are obligated to live out their faithfulness and gratitude to God. This also explains why Calvin demanded a literate and learned populace. Calvin supported free schools, open to both girls and boys.

Some argue that the United States is a Christian nation. If you want to be accurate you really should say the United States is a Calvinist Protestant nation. Wait, please! Before brickbats from the ACLU start crashing my way or applause from the 700 Club, there’s three catches.

Intrinsic to Calvinism is a wise suspicion of religion and a healthy respect for constitutional law as superior. No one, neither King nor Pope, is above the law. In order to protect the integrity of religion, the state must never meddle with nor endorse any particular religion.

Second catch? Democracy by itself can be a lousy form of government, which fortunately is why the United States rejects being a democracy. We are a republic based upon separation of powers. Calvin was a realist. Tyranny and chaos always prowl around the corner. Calvinism ever seeks to balance the tension between ardor and order. People are naturally good but also corruptible and bloody dangerous. Worse than a despotic monarch is the tyranny of the majority. If you want the perfect example of the difference between a republic and a democracy, compare the American Revolution with the French Revolution. Our Calvinistic inspired Revolution led to the Constitution. The French Revolution, fueled by the masses, produced baskets of severed heads.

Third catch? For our nation to long endure or any nation to prosper, nations need to be buttressed, like a bridge, upon certain pillars, certain inviolable divine truths. These are more than Western truths. We speak of human dignity and equality, the right to justice, the sacredness of individual conscience, and personal liberty so we may live responsible, obedient, and loving lives. Freedom does not mean freedom from, but freedom for right living.

Without these abiding principles by which we make our daily judgments, freedom cannot flourish. It will turn demonic. This is why democracy self-destructs in certain lands where these inviolable truths have failed to captivate and guide the souls of all their citizens. Freedom means more than the right to vote. Think of it as entering a marriage lacking commitments to agreed upon beliefs and practices of respect, mutuality, devotion -- "I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be thy loving and faithful husband..."

For the introverted scholar he was, Calvin's symbol reveals the bright and burning character of this man whose 500th birthday deserves international celebration. Calvin's symbol? A flaming heart offered up to God. Happy Birthday!