

The Joy of Calvinism

The definition of a Calvinist as being a person who 'is miserable at the thought that someone somewhere is actually enjoying themselves' is sadly all too typical of the popular misperception of the Free Church (and other forms of Reformed Christianity) in Scotland today. Ricki Fulton's Rev I.M Jolly (and his alter ego Rev W.E Free) are caricatures, but sadly caricatures which are popular because they reflect a common understanding. Religion, especially of the Scottish Presbyterian kind, is doom, gloom, blackness, depressive and joyless. Of course our sensible countrymen do not want the happy clappy type of religion either (unless it is the Soweto Gospel Choir), but they do love to blame almost everything on poor John Calvin and John Knox. If the weather is bad, taxes too high, if we drink too much, are useless at sport or can't write an opera to save ourselves, it is all because of our Calvinist inheritance. And how many more times do we have to hear the media of Middle England refer to the Prime Minister as a dour Presbyterian Scot (the three words of course going together)?

The Miserable Christian

At this point it would be all too easy to admit guilt (like a good Calvinist!), blame our ancestors, have a go at sections of the Church today, and then go on to say how 'real' Christianity is not like that. But I can't. In 25 years' membership in the Free Church, urban and rural, Highland and Lowland, I have rarely come across people who have been made miserable by their Calvinism. In fact in general most of the people I have met are normal, healthy, well balanced human beings whose faith is actually a source for joy, rather than a cause of misery. Yes, there are people in the Church who are miserable. And there are people who complain, moan and have a spirit of bitterness. But that is not *because* of their Christianity – it is *in defiance* of it. Christians are commanded to be thankful – and we have a great deal to be thankful for. A complaining, moaning, bitter Christian is never a thankful one. This is not to say that we never become unhappy or that sorrow is sin. Such stupidity almost deserves no answer. Of course we become unhappy but that is usually caused by the same reasons as everyone else's - we are not immune from the sorrows and pains of this world. And we are not cut off from its joys either.

All things richly to enjoy

In July I had the immense privilege of watching my 'other' team, Barcelona, play against Dundee United at Tannadice. It was a really enjoyable evening – being able to thrill at the skill and style of Ronaldinho, Deco, Eto, Henry et al. Later on in this *Record* you can read a review of the last Harry Potter. Those who want to condemn the books as advocating witchcraft are kind of missing the point. The Potter books are popular because they are immensely enjoyable. JK Rowling has no aim other than to write good stories (which are actually very moralistic and, in the tradition of all good fairy tales, about the battle between good and evil). People read

them because they enjoy them. And in terms of attacking the Christian world view they are a lot less dangerous than *Neighbours*, *EastEnders* or *The Daily Mail*. As Christians we can enjoy reading a good book, listening to music, watching a good film, eating good food and having a drink with friends. Of course any of these things can be abused, so that what is given to us by the Lord, richly to enjoy, becomes instead a curse. But that never justifies any Christian pronouncing what God has given 'unclean' – indeed it is a sign of the heresy of the End Times when religious people seek to forbid marriage, eating, etc.

The Happy Man

I once received a lovely letter from a good woman who was a wee bit upset that I appeared to be advocating drinking alcohol (I was in fact stating the biblical and traditional Free Church position). She wondered whether I was betraying the memory of the 'godly' Lachlan Mackenzie (a particular hero of hers). I was happy to write her and point out that the Rev Lachlan Mackenzie of Lochcarron would have endorsed my position and indeed went a lot further, having an illicit still in his own manse. Of course this was not the reason he was nicknamed *The Happy Man!* His joy was in the Lord but the point is that joy in the Lord means that we can enjoy other things all the more, not the less.

Just as Christians do not grieve as do others, neither do we enjoy as do others. We enjoy so much more. The problem for the unbeliever is simply this – you have the gifts but you do not know the giver, and thus your enjoyment of the gifts is impaired. Indeed, instead of the gifts being welcomed as gracious gifts from a generous God, they can often become idols in themselves. Thus instead of going to watch a football match as a thing of skill and beauty, the supporter goes to 'worship' his team. His identity is so caught up with these 11 men kicking a ball around that he will get angry, depressed, frustrated and bitter when they lose and almost fall into states of ecstasy when they win. The unbeliever has no point of reference, no ultimate means of distinguishing between different kinds of joy and between the joy of experiencing the gifts and the joy of fellowship with the Giver. But the believer knows and is known. Thus we can enjoy the gifts all the more, without turning them into meaningless idols. The ultimate joy is to know God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And if we cannot thank the triune God for what we are doing, eating, drinking or watching then we should not be involved with them.

Joy in Worship

If that is true, then we need to ask ourselves how this joy is reflected in our worship. I have just been reading John Stott's marvellous new book, *The Living Church*. Whilst he warns us about flippancy and irreverence (a warning we need to hear even in the Free Church) he also states the following:

**Christianity is a joyful religion,
and every service should be a
celebration.**

'When I attend some church services, I almost think I have come to a funeral by mistake. Everybody is dressed in black. Nobody talks or smiles. The hymns are played at the pace of a snail or a tortoise, and the whole atmosphere is lugubrious. If I could overcome my Anglo-Saxon reserve, I would want to shout 'cheer up! Christianity is a joyful religion, and every service should be a celebration.' Every service a celebration? In the Free Church! I'm afraid that we are not good at joy in worship. There are exceptions, but is it not the norm that our worship is often devoid of joy (even of the 'deep, deep joy' that no one can see)? Why? Is it the lack of the Spirit in our midst? Is it culture and the fear of man? Is it style of worship?

I have experienced many joyful moments in Free Church worship, none more so than a number of years ago when I was in a house fellowship in Lewis. The worship was held first of all for 'the English'. It was good. The Word was read, a couple of psalms were sung and the prayers were heartfelt and reverent. But then we switched to 'the Gaelic' and the whole place was transformed. As the Gaelic psalms were sung there was swaying, tears and heartfelt praise. The prayers were fervent and the sighs and groans would have

satisfied the most ardent Charismatic! I loved it. Since that day I have often thought, if the Gaels can worship God in their own language from the heart, what about the rest of us who do not have 'the language of the Garden'? In comparison so much of our worship has no soul, no spirit and very little joy. Part of the trouble is that because the Free Church was dominated by the Western Isles in the 20th century, and because we had this appalling unbiblical doctrine of 'uniformity of worship' (at least in the way it is commonly understood), we ended up with the ridiculous situation of English psalms being sung in a Gaelic style. It is difficult to think of a more depressing and unedifying noise. Combine that with natural reserve, a misunderstanding of what reverence is, and the divorcing of worship from the reality of our everyday experience, and you can see how we have often fallen into this joyless worship. Let Kirk Sessions and congregations pray, think and act in order to deal with the sin of joyless worship. This is not a plea for frivolity, flippancy or entertainment 'fun' worship. God forbid. But please can we have some serious joy? In the words of Psalm 51:12 *'Give me back the joy I had; keep my willing spirit glad.'*

Meditation Moment

This is a new regular feature for *The Record*. Each month we will take a portion of Scripture, in line with the theme of that month, and reflect upon it.

The purpose of this is to encourage you as the reader to stop, take a break, find a quiet space, open your bible, reflect upon the passage and pray. Because all Scripture speaks of Christ can I suggest that you meditate on your relationship with Christ and that you seek to learn more of him and enter into a deeper fellowship with him. After all he does want to *'come in and eat with us'* (Revelation 3:20).

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For this month, please open your Bible to Hebrews 12:1-3. Read it and focus especially on the words *'Let us fix our thoughts on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross..''* And ask - Why did Jesus go to the Cross? Why did he not come down?

There are several answers to that. Firstly, because it was the Father's will and he always did the Father's will. Secondly he loved his people and he knew that he was making atonement for us, bearing our sin, suffering our hell, dying so that we might live. But there is also a third reason. He did not come down from the Cross because he saw the joy ahead of him. He saw the glory of returning to heaven – not as he came, emptying himself, but rather taking the fruits of his labour.

Psalm 22 is surely the ultimate song of the Cross. Jesus quoted its beginning words to show the extent of his suffering: *'My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?'* But he also quoted the last verse *'for he has done it' or 'it is finished'*. If you want to know something of what Christ was going through on the Cross, then read that psalm. You will notice that whilst it contains the most incredible sorrow and pain,

it also holds out the most wonderful joy. *'Those who seek the Lord will find him, the end of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, future generations will be told about the Lord.'* In



other words, Christ on the Cross was fully aware of what he was doing. He was fully aware of whom he was dying for. And he endured the Cross because he was looking forward to the joy of being in heaven and taking his people with him. His bought, redeemed and precious people; the Church of God which he bought with his own blood.

And we too can enter into the joy of the Lord, not least because the Christian can say *'The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'* Can there be any greater security, hope and joy than knowing that the Son of God loved you so much that he gave himself for you?! Reflect also on this – no matter what pain, distress and sorrow you are going through just now (and what could be more painful and distressing than the Cross?), you have been promised a 'joy unspeakable'. You share in that extravagant and exuberant joy of Christ. And that's not all! God sings over you. If the angels in heaven rejoice over you and God himself rejoices – then does that not make you think you have plenty reason to be joyful? The joy of the Lord is your strength.

*'The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.'*
Zephaniah 3:17