

Proudly donning Calvin's mantle

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Someone took offense at my writing recently, and he (I'm assuming) responded on Twitter with an avatar with the profile of John Calvin. I had [written something](#) about loving LGBTQ friends and how I had changed my mind about marriage equality. In [his correspondence](#), he began assuming things about my sex life (which still has my husband giggling).

I could talk about distilling a woman's voice to her sex life, something that is as frequent with porn culture as it is with purity culture. But I have something else I want to discuss.

The point is that he used [that Calvin painting](#), the one with the academic robe and little fur stole. Calvin's hat reminds me of some sort of academic beret, but it has a rim and--get this--ear flaps! I love that painting. In fact, apart from his horrifying actions against Servetus, I love Calvin. His grouchy, sarcastic tone. His brilliance. The way he could get his mind around theology *and* governance. I am Presbyterian, after all. So, it caused some cognitive dissonance to have Calvin condemning me on Twitter.

I often read about the "New Calvinists," or "Neo-Calvinists," or even simply "Calvinists" and the words are followed by names like Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; John Piper, the Baptist preacher and writer; or Mark Driscoll, the former hipster Seattle pastor and writer. Because of this identification, many people have a peculiar view of Calvinism. They automatically think that Calvinism is akin to God-ordained sexism and homophobia. I even find religion writers, who ought to know their history better, equating Calvinism with complementarianism.

Then there are the skirmishes in the Presbyterian Church (USA), where a conservative part of the church draws a line in the sand and says that they are leaving if the majority of the church goes past that line. The lines are different,

depending on the moment of history. We've had that line drawn over slavery, the five fundamentals of the faith, civil rights, women's rights, and (most recently) LGBTQ ordination and marriage equality. Then if the denomination moves past those lines and upholds the abolition of slavery, full rights of African-Americans, the equality of women, or the celebration of same gender loving couples, the splinter group tells the denomination that we don't care about the Bible, we don't love Jesus, and they are leaving. Then, like a couple in a nasty divorce, we have to spend a ton of time and money sorting out property issues.

A conservative Presbyterian friend illuminated the other side of the story. "I didn't leave the PC(USA)," he said, "the denomination left the Reformed faith." He's not alone in his thinking, as he upholds theological purity over democratic process. Many believe that Mohler, Piper and these conservative break-offs hold the mantle of Calvinism and Reformed theology. But I have to disagree.

Calvin's theology cannot be understood in a vacuum, or without the genius of his governance. He was a law student as well as a pastor, and he used his organizational skills in Geneva. For a couple hundred years after Calvin's thought permeated Europe, incredible shifts towards a representative democracy took place. Calvinist Republics played a large part in that overturn.

Of course, Calvin wrote the *Institutes* to the French King and upheld religious monarchies. But, the influence of the system spread much wider than Calvin's original intentions, and the theology and system of governance helped dismantle fealty and overthrow royalty. Calvin created a system of careful checks and balances, and opened up an era where the common person could have a voice. And the inevitable trajectory was that the system allowed for discernment when we come to these lines in the sand. The hot topics of the day—whether they are usury, nepotism, simony, civil rights, gender equality, or LGBTQ rights—don't have to destroy our church.

Decisions are not made by Papal decree. Judgments are not declared by the pastor with the biggest steeple or the hottest real estate. Theological disagreements are not even settled by the guy who has been on the *NYT* bestseller list the longest. They are settled through a democratic system of spiritual discernment. And if you don't agree with the outcome, and you decide to pack up your big steeple and hot real estate... then you don't get to tell me that I'm not a Calvinist.

Did Calvin's voluminous writings portray a feminist who embraced marriage equality? Of course not. It was a different time and we cannot take our understandings of gender and sexuality and superimpose them on Calvin's thought. But, the system he set up allowed for these things to evolve.

So, can an author who believes in complementarianism be the mouthpiece for Calvinists? Can a church that decides to cede when majority vote doesn't go its way hold the mantle of Calvin? Can a pastor who believes that his teaching should not be questioned be the heir to Calvin's thought? Can theologians who held up segregation and splintered off into a new denomination declare that they speak for Calvin? From my vantage point, most of these positions seem to line up with fealty more than democracy.

So, even when Calvin is used against me on Twitter, or reporters equate Calvinism and sexism, I'm going to wrestle back my bit of Calvin's mantle and uphold it proudly. Because Calvinism is not about purity of belief. It is about the messy, Spirit-filled struggles and discernment of people who are Reformed *and still reforming*.