

CALVIN WAS A HUMANIST

(NO, NOT THAT CALVIN)

BY RON STEELMAN

My ten year old son walked up to me and quoted a line from a large book of Calvin & Hobbes comic strips by Bill Watterson -- all three volumes are in our home library because my wife loves that rotten little kid Calvin. My son's selection had Calvin talking to Hobbes about Santa and God and Calvin said, "If he's real, why doesn't he show himself to prove it?" I guess I hadn't been paying attention to the full scope of Watterson's work. I was curious to find out what other quotes might be of interest to me as a Humanist. I snatched the book out of my son's hands and told him I needed to borrow it to do some research. As he walked away, he grumbled, "OK, fine. I'll go read my copy of 'On the Origin of Species'." But I want the 'Calvin & Hobbes' back in an hour."

In the introduction of the book it said, "When Watterson was coming up with names for the characters of his comic strip, he decided upon Calvin (after the Protestant reformer John Calvin) and Hobbes (after the social philosopher Thomas Hobbes) as a "tip of the hat" to the political science department at Kenyon" [College where he went to school].

I won't digress here into an analysis of the five points of Calvinism (you should thank me for this). However, I think it's important to say that although Calvin (Watterson's Calvin) often commented on and questioned various religious and philosophical concepts in the comic strip, he did not attempt to inflict upon us any of John Calvin's five goofy theological points. When he occasionally sidled up close to any of that flimflam, it was purely a sideways glance through his bent lens of reality. The result: humor.

Here follow just a few selected Watterson quotes from my search for lines related to Humanism:

>>> "To invent your own life's meaning is not easy, but it's still allowed, and I think you'll be happier for the trouble."

>>> "If people sat outside and looked at the stars each night, I'll bet they'd live a lot differently."

>>> "We're so busy watching out for what's just ahead of us that we don't take time to enjoy where we are."

>>> "You know what's weird? Day by day, nothing seems to change, but pretty soon...everything's different."

>>> "The surest sign that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe is that it has never tried to contact us."
(once quoted by Stephen Hawking, Cambridge University Professor of Astrophysics)

The strip ran in newspapers for 10 years, from 1985 to 1995. There are thousands of great Calvin & Hobbes lines and I discovered that many of my friends seem to have different favorites. . .usually based on their sensibilities. My friend Bruce likes: "Why waste time on education when ignorance is instantaneous?" While I like: "You know, Hobbes, some days even my lucky rocketship underpants don't help."

Watterson is brilliant. If you buy any or all of the books of his collected Calvin & Hobbes strips, you will be happy you did. When my son came back for the book, he said, "Watterson's right up there with Darwin, he's just funnier."

Footnote:

While Googling "Bill Watterson atheist" I discovered a variety of objections to his comics from religious folk. What sound and fury! However, I don't think anyone knows what his beliefs really are. One blog entry told a story by a

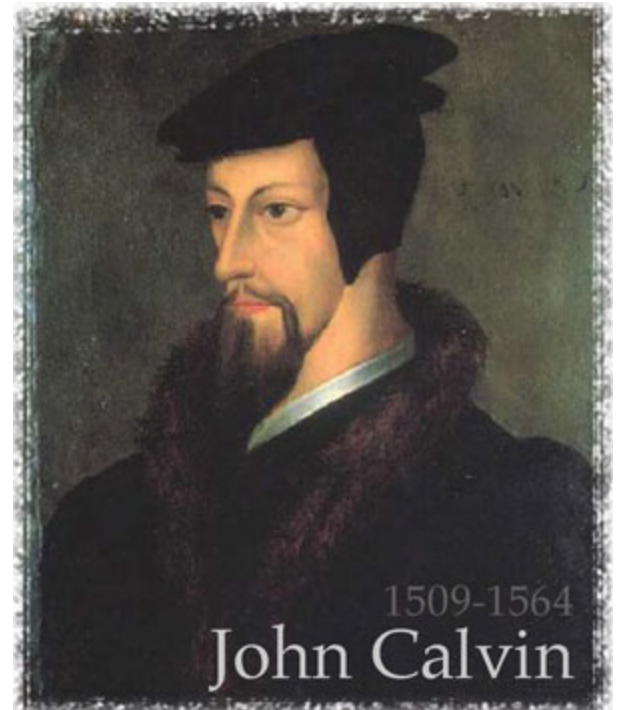
guy who was visiting with relatives when he was a kid. He had taken along his big book of Calvin & Hobbes. When his extended family saw what he was reading, they were so upset that they took the C&H book away from him. It's just another example of how religious people hate it when you ask questions like Calvin does. Also on their 'bad book list' is a collection of The Far Side comics by Gary Larson. We own the two-volume set. I'd better abscond with them so I can re-read them before my 10-year-old finds them. Then maybe I'll be able to keep up with him during a critique of Larson's work. He's almost 11, you know.

Calvin & Hobbes



Unconditional Election

Unconditional Election was one of John Calvin's five points of Calvinism. Unconditional election is the Calvinist teaching that before God created the world, he chose to save some people according to his own purposes and apart from any conditions related to those persons. What about those not on his list? Oh, well. This is how "Predestination" crept in to our minds. I didn't realize that God played favorites like this. I want to speak to my attorney!



Bill Watterson's 1990 Commencement Address at Kenyon College

<http://web.mit.edu/jmorzins/www/C-H-speech.html>