

“A Sacrifice Well Pleasing to God”: John Calvin and the Missionary Endeavor of the Church¹

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INTRODUCTION

IT HAS OFTEN been maintained that the sixteenth-century Reformers had a poorly-developed missiology and that overseas missions to non-Christians was an area to which they gave little thought. Yes, this argument runs, they rediscovered the apostolic gospel, but they had no vision to spread it to the uttermost parts of the earth.² Possibly the very first author to raise the question about early Protestantism’s failure to apply itself to missionary work was the Roman Catholic theologian and controversialist, Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621). Bellarmine argued that one of the marks of a true church

was its continuity with the missionary passion of the Apostles. In his mind, Roman Catholicism’s missionary activity was indisputable and this supplied a strong support for its claim to stand in solidarity with the Apostles. As Bellarmine maintained,

[I]n this one century the Catholics have converted many thousands of heathens in the new world. Every year a certain number of Jews are converted and baptized at Rome by Catholics who adhere in loyalty to the Bishop of Rome.... The Lutherans compare themselves to the apostles and the evangelists; yet though they have among them a very large number of Jews, and in Poland and Hungary have the Turks as their near neighbors, they have hardly converted so much as a handful.³

But such a characterization fails to account for the complexity of this issue. First of all, in the earliest years of the Reformation none of the major Protestant bodies possessed significant naval and maritime resources to take the gospel outside of the bounds of Europe. The Iberian Catholic kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, on the other hand, who were the acknowledged leaders among missions-sending regions at this time, had such resources aplenty. Moreover, their missionary endeavors were often indistinguishable from imperialist ventures. It is noteworthy that other Roman Catholic nations of Europe like Poland and Hungary also lacked sea-going capabilities and evidenced no more cross-cultural missionary concern at that time than did Lutheran Saxony or Reformed Zurich. It is thus plainly wrong to make the simplistic assertion that Roman Catholic nations were committed to overseas missions whereas no Protestant power was so committed.⁴

Second, it is vital to recognize that, as Scott Hendrix has shown, the Reformation was the attempt to “make European culture more Christian than it had been. It was, if you will, an attempt to reroot faith, to rechristianize Europe.”⁵ In the eyes of the Reformers, this program involved two accompanying convictions. First, they considered what passed for Christianity in late mediaeval Europe as sub-Christian at best, pagan at worst. As the French Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) put it in his *Reply to Sadoleto* (1539):

[T]he light of divine truth had been extinguished, the Word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion, and the pastoral office subverted. Meanwhile, impiety so stalked abroad that almost no doctrine of religion was pure from admixture, no ceremony free from error, no part, however minute, of divine worship untarnished by superstition.⁶

The Reformers, then, viewed their task as a missionary one: they were planting true Christian churches.⁷

In what follows, a brief examination of the missiology of John Calvin clearly shows the error of the perspective that the Reformation was by and large a non-missionary movement.⁸ John Calvin’s theology of missions is developed by looking first at the theme of the victorious advance of Christ’s kingdom that looms so large in his writings. Statements from Calvin regarding the means and the motivations for extending this kingdom are then examined to further show Calvin’s concern for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Finally, there is a brief look at the way Calvin’s Geneva functioned as a missionary center.

THE VICTORIOUS ADVANCE OF CHRIST’S KINGDOM

A frequent theme in Calvin’s writings and sermons is that of the victorious advance of Christ’s kingdom in the world. God the Father, Calvin says in his prefatory address to Francis I in his theological masterpiece, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, has appointed Christ to “rule from sea to sea, and from the rivers even to the ends of the earth.” The reason for the Spirit’s descent at Pentecost, Calvin notes further in a sermon on Acts 2, was in order for the gospel to “reach all the ends and extremities of the world.” In a sermon on 1 Tim 2:5–6, one of a series of sermons on 1 Timothy 2, Calvin underlines again the universality of the Christian faith: Jesus came, not simply to save a few, but “to extend his grace over all the world.”⁹

From that same sermon series, Calvin can thus declare that “God wants his grace to be known to all the world, and he has commanded that his gospel be preached to all creatures; we must (as much as we are able) seek the salvation of those who today are strangers to the faith, who seem to be completely deprived of God’s goodness.”¹⁰ It was this global perspective on the significance of the gospel that also gave Calvin’s theology a genuine dynamism and forward movement. It has been rightly said that if it had not been for the so-called Calvinist wing of the Reformation many of the great gains of that era would have died on the vine.¹¹

MEANS FOR THE EXTENSION OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM

Calvin is quite certain that the extension of Christ's kingdom is first of all God's work. Commenting on Matt 24:30, he can assert that it is not "by human means but by heavenly power ... that the Lord will gather His Church."¹² Or consider his comments on the phrase "a door having also been opened to me" in 2 Cor 2:12.

[The meaning of this metaphor is] that an opportunity of furthering the gospel had presented itself. Just as an open door makes an entrance possible, so the Lord's servants make progress when opportunity is given them. The door is shut when there is no hope of success. Thus when the door is shut we have to go a different way rather than wear ourselves out in vain efforts to get through it but, when an opportunity for edification presents itself, we should realize that a door has been opened for us by the hand of God in order that we may introduce Christ into that place and we should not refuse to accept the generous invitation that God thus gives us.¹³

For Calvin, the metaphor of an "open door" spoke volumes about the way in which the advance of the church is utterly dependent on the mercy of a Sovereign God.

Now, this does not mean that Christians are to be passive in their efforts to reach the lost and can sit back and wait for God to do it all. In his comments on Isa 12:5, Calvin deals with this common misinterpretation of God's divine sovereignty.

[Isaiah] shows that it is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation. While we exhort and encourage others, we must not at the same time sit down in indolence, but it is proper that we set an example before others; for nothing can be more absurd than to see lazy and slothful men who are exciting other men to praise God.¹⁴

As David Calhoun rightly observes, "The power

to save [souls] rests with God but He displays and unfolds His salvation in our preaching of the gospel."¹⁵ While missions and evangelism are indeed God's work, he delights to use his people as his instruments.

The first major way in which God uses his people for the conversion of others is through prayer—our prayers for the conversion of unbelievers.¹⁶ In Calvin's words, God "bids us to pray for the salvation of unbelievers"¹⁷ and Scripture passages like 1 Tim 2:4 encourage us not to "cease to pray for all people in general."¹⁸ We see this conviction at work in Calvin's own prayers, a good number of which have been recorded for us at the end of his sermons. Each of his sermons on Deuteronomy, for instance, ends with a prayer that runs something like this: "may it please [God] to grant this [saving] grace, not only to us, but also to all peoples and nations of the earth."¹⁹ In fact, in the liturgy that Calvin drew up for his church in Geneva, there is this prayer:

We pray you now, O most gracious God and merciful Father, for all people everywhere. As it is your will to be acknowledged as the Saviour of the whole world, through the redemption wrought by Your Son Jesus Christ, grant that those who are still estranged from the knowledge of him, being in the darkness and captivity of error and ignorance, may be brought by the illumination of your Holy Spirit and the preaching of your gospel to the right way of salvation, which is to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.²⁰

Moreover, Calvin would admonish believers not to be discouraged if they do not see fruit immediately issuing as a result of their prayers. As he states in his comments on Gen 17:23,

So, at this day, God seems to enjoin a thing impossible to be done, when he requires his gospel to be preached everywhere in the whole world, for the purpose of restoring it from death

to life. For we see how great is the obstinacy of nearly all men, and what numerous and powerful methods of resistance Satan employs; so that, in short, all the ways of access to these principles are obstructed. Yet it behooves individuals to do their duty, and not to yield to impediments; and, finally, our endeavors and our labors shall by no means fail of that success, which is not yet apparent.²¹

Believers, then, must actively employ their strength to bring God's salvation to others. In his *Sermon on Deuteronomy 33.18-19* Calvin can thus argue that it is not enough to be involved in God's service. Christians need to be drawing others to serve and adore God.²² Specifically, how does God use the strength of Christians? Calvin's answer is that it is by their words and by their deeds. Given Calvin's high appreciation of the Word of God one would naturally expect that this would be seen as a major means of witness. Thus, Calvin can state that whenever the Old Testament prophets foretold "the renewal of the Church or its extension over the whole globe," they always assigned "the first place to the Word."²³ Acting on this conviction, Calvin encouraged the translation and printing of the Scriptures in the work of Reformation in Geneva. This also explains his own devotion to regular expository preaching and his penning of commentaries on all of the books of the New Testament (except for 2 and 3 John, and Revelation), and on a goodly number of Old Testament books. Preaching is also central here, as Calvin notes, "God wants his grace to be known in all the world, and he has commanded that his gospel be preached to all people."²⁴

Witness, though, is borne not only by the Word, but also by our deeds. Calvin had established an academy in Geneva especially to train men to be missionaries for his native land, France. A significant number of these men did indeed go back as missionaries and some died as martyrs. Five such missionaries, for example—Martial Alba, Pierre Ecrivain, Charles Favre, Pierre Navihères, and

Bernard Seguin—had come from Lausanne to Geneva in the spring of 1552 where they had gotten to know Calvin as they prepared to go back to France as missionaries in the region of Lyons. As they were on the road to Lyons they met a man who asked if he could travel with them. They had no suspicions of the man. He seemed very hospitable, and on arrival at Lyons, he urged them to come and stay with him. They did so, and he subsequently betrayed them into the hands of the authorities in April 1552. As soon as Calvin heard of their arrest he began a letter-writing campaign seeking to bring pressure on the French king Henri II through a number of German Protestant allies. By the spring of 1553, however, it became obvious that he would not be able to obtain their release. Calvin wrote the five who were facing death by martyrdom on May 15, 1553. The students never saw this letter for they were burned on May 16:

Since it pleases [God] to employ you to the death in maintaining his quarrel [with the world], he will strengthen your hands in the fight, and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain. And though the fruit may not all at once appear, yet in time it shall spring up more abundantly than we can express. But as he hath vouchsafed you this privilege, that your bonds have been renowned, and that the noise of them has been everywhere spread abroad, it must needs be, in despite of Satan, that your death should resound far more powerfully, so that the name of our Lord be magnified thereby. For my part, I have no doubt, if it please this kind Father to take you unto himself, that he has preserved you hitherto, in order that your long-continued imprisonment might serve as a preparation for the better awakening of those whom he has determined to edify by your end. For let enemies do their utmost, they never shall be able to bury out of sight that light which God has made to shine in you, in order to be contemplated from afar.²⁵

Here, Calvin saw the act of martyrdom as a powerful witness for the gospel, though it is one without words.

Calvin was also convinced that each and every Christian must be prepared to witness, by both word and deed, about God's grace and mercy in Christ and that to all whom they can. When it comes to the spreading of the gospel, it is noteworthy that he makes no distinction between the responsibility of pastors and of other Christians. All believers must be involved.²⁶

It also needs noting that Calvin and the Geneva pastors helped further the work of Reformation evangelism in Europe through print media. In fact, by Calvin's death, his interest in Christian publishing meant that there were no less than 34 printing-houses in Geneva, which printed Bibles and Christian literature in a variety of European languages. In the 1550s Geneva was particularly a hive of biblical editions and translations: for example, Robert Estienne's Greek New Testament of 1551 which divided the text into verses for the first time; a new edition of the Vulgate; an Italian translation and Spanish translation in 1555 and 1556 respectively; at least 22 editions of the French Bible. And in 1560 a complete English translation of the Bible was printed sometime between April 10 and May 30 of that year. This was the *Geneva Bible*, the bedrock of early English Puritanism.

There is one means that Calvin expected God to use in the spread of the gospel that we today in the West probably do not expect, that is, evangelism through Christian rulers and magistrates. For example, when Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) came to the throne of England, Calvin saw it as a hopeful sign for the advance of the gospel in England. Over the years he also corresponded extensively with a number of French noblewomen, especially Jeanne d'Albret (1528–1572), queen of Navarre. This French noblewoman played a significant role in the French Reformation, and Calvin recognized his need of her support, and that of other nobility, if new territories were to be

opened up to the spread of the evangelical faith.

MOTIVATIONS FOR EXTENDING CHRIST'S KINGDOM

What was to motivate the believer in bearing witness to the faith? First and foremost was the glory of God. As Calvin stated in his *Sermon on Deuteronomy 33:18-19*: "When we know God to be our Father, should we not desire that he be known as such by all? And if we do not have this passion, that all creatures do him homage, is it not a sign that his glory means little to us?"²⁷

In other words, if we are truly passionate about God's glory, this passion will result in witness. The Christian life, in all of its apostolic fullness, is marked by self-denial, the recognition that the Christian does not belong to himself or herself, but belongs totally to God and is to live for God's glory. In Calvin's words,

Even though the law of the Lord provides the finest and best-disposed method of ordering a man's life, it seemed good to the Heavenly Teacher to shape his people by an even more explicit plan to that rule which he had set forth in the law. Here [in Romans 12], then, is the beginning of this plan: the duty of believers is "to present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him"...we are consecrated and dedicated to God in order that we may hereafter think, speak, meditate, and do, nothing except to his glory.²⁸

Moreover, bearing witness to the faith is pleasing to God. Consider in this regard Calvin's letter to a Christian landowner on island of Jersey that was written around the year 1553.

We praise God for having inclined your heart to try if it will be possible to erect, by your means, a small church on the place where you reside. And indeed, according as the agents of the Devil strive by every act of violence to abolish the true religion, extinguish the doctrine of salvation, and

exterminate the name of Jesus Christ, it is very just that we should labor on, our side to further the progress of the gospel, that, by these means, God may be served in purity, and the poor wandering sheep may be put under the protection of the sovereign Pastor to whom everyone should be subject. And you know that it is a sacrifice well pleasing to God, to advance the spread of the Gospel by which we are enlightened in the way of salvation, to dedicate our life to the honor of him who has ransomed us at so costly a price in order to bear rule in the midst of us.²⁹

Then, we are to evangelize because we have been commanded to do so by Christ.³⁰ Compassion for the lost condition of people also should drive Christians to witness. “If we have any humanity in us,” he declared in a sermon on Deuteronomy 33, “seeing men going to perdition ... ought we not be moved by pity, to rescue the poor souls from hell, and teach them the way of salvation?”³¹ In fact, a Christian who is not involved in witness is really a contradiction in terms. As Calvin remarks in his *Commentary on Isaiah*:

[T]he godly will be filled with such an ardent desire to spread the doctrines of religion, that everyone not satisfied with his own calling and his personal knowledge will desire to draw others along with him. And indeed nothing could be more inconsistent with the nature of faith than that deadness which would lead a man to disregard his brethren, and to keep the light of knowledge choked up within his own breast.³²

GENEVA AS A MISSIONARY CENTER

Geneva was not a large city. During Calvin’s lifetime it reached a peak of slightly more than 21,000 by 1560, of whom a goodly number were religious refugees.³³ Nevertheless, it became *the* missionary center of Europe in this period of the Reformation. Calvin sought to harness the energies and gifts of many of the religious refugees so as to make Geneva central to the expansion

of Reformation thought and piety throughout Europe. This meant training and preparing many of these refugees to go back to their native lands as evangelists and reformers.

Understandably, Calvin was vitally concerned about the evangelization of his native land, France, and his countrymen, the French. It has been estimated that by 1562 some 2,150 congregations had been established in France with around 2 million members, many of them converted through the witness of men trained in Geneva.³⁴ That 2 million comprised 50 percent of the upper and middle classes, and a full 10 percent of the entire population. The growth is enormous when one reckons that at the time of Calvin’s conversion, in the early 1530s, there were probably no more than a couple of thousand evangelicals in France.

But Calvin was concerned not only for France, but also for the reformation of the church in places like Scotland and England, Spain as well as Poland, Hungary and the Netherlands. He even encouraged a mission to Brazil in 1555, which turned out, though, to be a failure.³⁵ It is noteworthy that when the church in Geneva heard of this Brazilian opportunity, contemporary chronicler (and participant in the mission to Brazil) Jean de Léry recorded that “Upon ... hearing this news, the church of Geneva at once gave thanks to God for the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ in a country so distant and likewise so foreign and among a nation entirely without the knowledge of the true God.”³⁶

Little wonder that in light of all these missionary projects, Calvin could write, “When I consider how very important this corner [i.e., Geneva] is for the propagation of the kingdom of Christ, I have good reason to be anxious that it should be carefully watched over.”³⁷

A CONCLUDING WORD

Of late, there have been assertions that the Christian tradition that comes down from Calvin is essentially uncomfortable with missionary zeal and is inherently anti-missionary. Some of

those making these assertions are knowledgeable historians who are rightly esteemed in their respective schools. Possibly they are confusing biblical Calvinism with the hyper-Calvinism that has frequently developed on the fringes of the Reformed tradition. Every movement has its fringe element that no more represents the center than chalk resembles cheese. In this essay, we have seen that the missionary zeal that marks biblical Calvinism—espoused by men like John Bunyan and John Eliot, Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd, Andrew Fuller and William Carey, Horatius Bonar and Charles H. Spurgeon—is traceable back to one of its key sources, John Calvin himself.

ENDNOTES

- ¹An earlier version of this article first appeared in the online journal *Reformation21* 13 (September 2006). Used with permission.
- ²See Kenneth J. Stewart, “Calvinism and Missions: the Contested Relationship Revisited,” *Themelios* 34, no. 1 (April 2009), especially the section “A Much Older Charge: The Entire Reformation Movement Neglected Missions” [cited 7 Dec 2009]. Online: <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/34-1/Calvinism-and-missions-the-contested-relationship-revisited>.
- ³Robert Bellarmine, *Controversiae*, Book IV as quoted in Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1964), 221.
- ⁴Stewart, “Calvinism and Missions.”
- ⁵Scott Hendrix, “Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization,” *Church History* 69 (2000): 561.
- ⁶John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate* (ed. John C. Olin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 74–75.
- ⁷Hendrix, “Rerooting the Faith,” 558–68.
- ⁸David B. Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 17.
- ⁹For the three quotes in this paragraph, see *ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁰*Sermon 13* on 1 Tim 2:8. For this quote, I am indebted to Elsie McKee, “Calvin and Praying for ‘All People

Who Dwell on Earth,” *Interpretation* 63 (2009): 134.

- ¹¹Jean-Marc Berthoud, “John Calvin and the Spread of the Gospel in France” in *Fulfilling the Great Commission* (Westminster Conference Papers; [London]: Westminster Conference, 1992), 44–46.
- ¹²Cited in Calhoun, “Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 18.
- ¹³*Commentary on 2 Corinthians 2:12* [Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 10; *The Second Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (trans. T. A. Smal; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964), 32].
- ¹⁴Commentary on Isaiah 12:5 in John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (trans. William Pringle; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851) 1:403.
- ¹⁵Calhoun, “Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 18.
- ¹⁶In this regard, see the masterful essay by McKee, “Calvin and Praying,” 130–40, *passim*.
- ¹⁷Cited in *ibid.*, 133.
- ¹⁸Cited in *ibid.*, 138.
- ¹⁹Calhoun, “Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 19, n.23; McKee, “Calvin and Praying,” 139–40.
- ²⁰Cited in McKee, “Calvin and Praying,” 139.
- ²¹Commentary on Genesis 17:23 in John Calvin, *Genesis* (trans. and ed. John King; 1847 ed.; repr., Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 465.
- ²²*Sermon 196* on Deuteronomy 33:18–19 in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* (ed. William Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss; *Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. 57; Brunswick, 1885; repr., New York: Johnson, 1964), 29:175.
- ²³Cited in Calhoun, “Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 22.
- ²⁴Cited in McKee, “Calvin and Praying,” 134.
- ²⁵*Letter 318* [in Jules Bonnet, ed., *Letters of John Calvin* (trans. Mr. Constable; 1858 ed.; repr., New York: Lenox Hill, 1972), 2:406.
- ²⁶Calhoun, “Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 22.
- ²⁷*Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18–19 (*Ioannis Calvini Opera*, 29:175).

- ²⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:689–90 (3.7.1).
- ²⁹Letter 339 in Bonnet, *Letters*, 2:453.
- ³⁰Calhoun, “Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 20.
- ³¹Sermon 196 on Deuteronomy 33:18–19 (*Ioannis Calvini Opera*, 29:175).
- ³²Commentary on Isaiah 2:3 in Calvin, *Isaiah*, 1:94.
- ³³Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), 121.
- ³⁴W. Stanford Reid, “Calvin’s Geneva: A Missionary Centre,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 42, no. 3 (September–December, 1983): 69.
- ³⁵See the story of this important mission in G. Baez–Camargo, “The Earliest Protestant Missionary Venture in Latin America,” *Church History* 21 (1952): 135–145; Amy Glassner Gordon, “The First Protestant Missionary Effort: Why Did It Fail?,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8, no.1 (January 1984): 12–18; and Stewart, “Calvinism and Missions.”
- ³⁶Jean de Léry, *Journal de Bord de Jean de Léry en la Terre de Brésil 1557, présenté et commenté par M.R. Mayeux* (Paris, 1957) as quoted in R. Pierce Beaver, “The Genevan Mission to Brazil” in *The Heritage of John Calvin* (ed. John Bratt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 61.
- ³⁷Bonnet, *Letters*, 2:227.