

The Biblical Preaching of John Calvin

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REGARDED AS ARGUABLY the most important and influential figure in Western Civilization over the past one thousand years,¹ John Calvin towers above the landscape of church history as the greatest Reformer of the sixteenth century.² A man of immense abilities and prolific

industry, this monumental pillar of the Christian faith was many things—a world-class theologian, a revered exegete, a renowned teacher, a master commentator, a church statesman, and the most prodigious leader of the Protestant movement. But first and foremost, Calvin was a pastor, the faithful shepherd of two churches for almost thirty years, and amid his many pastoral duties, he was primarily a preacher of the Word. For this magisterial Reformer, biblical preaching was job number one.

Born five hundred years ago on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France, Calvin, a second generation Reformer, gave himself to the exposition of the Word of God as perhaps no one ever has in church

history. Educated at the finest universities in France under the leading instructors of the day, this brilliant lawyer became the theological genius of the Reformation, the man whom many believe to be the greatest teacher of Christian doctrine since the apostle Paul. Apart from the biblical authors themselves, Calvin stands as the most influential preacher of Scripture the world has witnessed.

THE REAL AND AUTHENTIC CALVIN

On the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Calvin's birth, in 1909, Emile Doumergue, a noted Calvin biographer, stood in the great Reformer's pulpit and said, "That is the Calvin who seems to me to be the real and authentic Calvin, the one who explains all the others: Calvin the preacher of Geneva, moulding by his words the spirit of the Reformed of the sixteenth century."³ Doumergue added, "While he has come to be remembered as a theologian who recovered the doctrinal landmarks, which had been buried under the debris of confused centuries, or as a powerful controversialist, whose name opponents have sought to fasten upon beliefs which they judged odious, the truth

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is that Calvin saw himself, first of all, as a pastor in the church of Christ and therefore as one whose chief duty must be to preach the Word.⁴ This was the *true* Reformer of Geneva, Calvin the preacher.

Church historian J. H. Merle d'Aubigné concurs with this assessment, maintaining that Calvin viewed the primacy of the pulpit to be “the heart of his ministry.”⁵ James Montgomery Boice likewise asserts,

Calvin had no weapon but the Bible. From the very first, his emphasis had been on Bible teaching.... Calvin preached from the Bible every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to be transformed. As the people of Geneva acquired knowledge of God's Word and were changed by it, the city became, as John Knox called it later, a New Jerusalem from which the gospel spread to the rest of Europe, England, and the New World.⁶

If Calvin had been forced to relinquish all his ministries except one, he would have certainly kept the pulpit.

THE CONTEXT OF CALVIN'S PREACHING

“Any appraisal of Calvin's preaching,” John Leith writes, “must begin with the context out of which and in which Calvin preached.”⁷ This being so, it is necessary that we recognize Calvin's preaching in light of the historical times in which he lived, that time known as the Reformation. Next to first century Christianity, Phillip Schaff writes that the Protestant movement of the sixteenth century is “the greatest event in history ... the chief propelling force in the history of modern civilization.”⁸ As it sought to bring the church back to the standards of Scripture, John Broadus (1827-1895), distinguished Professor of Homiletics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, notes four distinguishing marks of the Reformation.

A REVIVAL OF PREACHING

First, Broadus states that this monumental movement was marked by *a revival of preaching*. During the medieval centuries, the primacy of preaching had been all but lost. The pulpit was relegated to secondary status with the mass and its ritualism assuming the central place. What few preachers did exist, Broadus notes, were “exceptions to a rule.”⁹ For the previous millennium, from the fall of the Roman Empire (c. 500) to Luther's posting his 95 Theses (1517), preaching was subordinate to the sacerdotal system of Rome. But the dawning of the Reformation changed that. The Protestant movement ushered in a new day that restored preaching to its prominent place in Reformed churches. Broadus notes that the sixteenth century witnessed “a great outburst of preaching, such as had not been seen since the early Christian centuries.”¹⁰ Spearheading this outburst of preaching was the French born pastor who occupied the Geneva pulpit, John Calvin.

The Reformation was so pulpit-driven that it actually changed the architecture of the churches. Boice notes that Calvin ordered

the altars, long the centers of the Latin mass, be removed from the churches and that a pulpit, with a Bible on it, be placed at the center of the building. This was not to be on one side of the room, but at the very center, where every line of the architecture would carry the gaze of the worshiper to the Book which alone contains the way of salvation and outlines the principles upon which the church of the living God is to be governed.¹¹

With the Reformation, preaching was back in its preeminent place and at the helm was Calvin.

A REVIVAL OF BIBLICAL PREACHING

Further, Broadus notes that the Reformation witnessed *a revival of biblical preaching*. More than mere preaching was regained; it was a certain kind of preaching—*expository* preaching. Broadus

writes,

Instead of long and often fabulous stories about saints and martyrs, and accounts of miracles, instead of passages from Aristotle and Seneca, and fine-spun subtleties of the Schoolman, these men preached the Bible. The question was not what the Pope said; and even the Fathers, however highly esteemed, were not decisive authorities—that honor rightly belonged to the Bible alone. The preacher’s one great task was to set forth the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Word of God.¹²

In other words, *sola Scriptura* was restored to the pulpit.

“When the Reformation swept over Europe in the sixteenth century,” Boice adds, “there was an immediate elevation of the Word of God in Protestant services.”¹³ The Bible, long a neglected book in the public gathering of the church, was suddenly restored to the Reformed pulpit, and no one preached the Bible more than Calvin. The sheer volume of Calvin’s preaching is staggering. Upon his return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin preached twice on Sunday and then on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. In 1542, he was asked to preach more often, which he accepted. In October 1549, he increased his preaching duties to twice on Sunday, and every weekday, every other week. Calvin brought ten new sermons every fourteen days—an impressive number considering his vast commitments.

A REVIVAL OF CONTROVERSIAL PREACHING

Moreover, Broadus observes that the Reformation was *a revival of controversial preaching*. To this point, he writes, “It must not be forgotten that religious controversy is inevitable where living faith, in definite truth, is dwelling side by side with ruinous error and practical evils. And preachers may remember that controversial preaching, properly managed, is full of interest and full of power.”¹⁴ In this Protestant movement, the full

counsel of God was heard again, and with this full disclosure came controversy. The inevitable result of preaching the entire Bible is *always* controversy. Some four hundred years later, J. Gresham Machen would write, “Every true revival is born in controversy, and leads to more controversy.”¹⁵ The Reformation was no different.

At the forefront of this new movement, calling for reform, was the provocative preaching of John Calvin. As a naturally shy and introverted man, Calvin never sought the spotlight, much less controversy. Instead, he was a reclusive individual who preferred the quiet seclusion of the scholar’s study. But Calvin was providentially thrust into the pulpit in Geneva where he preached the full counsel of God. As a result, he found himself embroiled in controversy throughout his ministry. But such disputation is *always* inevitable when the unadulterated Word of God is proclaimed. Preaching *all* Scripture—*tota Scriptura*—always breeds a storm of unavoidable controversy, and Calvin stood in the eye of it.

A REVIVAL OF PREACHING THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

Finally, Broadus notes that the Reformation was marked by *a revival of preaching the doctrines of grace*. He asserts,

The doctrine of Divine sovereignty in human salvation was freely proclaimed by *all* the Reformers. However far some Protestants may have gone at a later period in opposition to these views, yet Protestantism was born of the doctrines of grace, and in the proclamation of these the Reformation preaching found its truest and highest power.¹⁶

Broadus unequivocally maintains that “the power of the gospel ... reside[s] in the great truth of salvation by sovereign grace.”¹⁷ Suffice to say, Calvin became the strongest exponent of these truths. Broadus states that this Genevan pastor “gave the ablest, soundest, clearest expositions of Scripture that have been seen for a thousand years.”¹⁸ So

convincing was Calvin in this proclamation that Broadus states, “The people who sneer at what is called Calvinism might as well sneer at Mount Blanc.”¹⁹ To be sure, Calvin’s assiduous expositions of these lofty doctrines in Scripture are irrefutable.

Calvin’s pulpit electrified Geneva and sent shock waves throughout Europe, Scotland, and England. Calvin’s teachings soon surged across the Atlantic to America with the arrival of the Pilgrims and others. The New England Colonies were staunchly Calvinistic, as were the Ivy League colleges, which were established to train men in the very truths taught in Geneva. Subsequently, sovereign grace preachers such as William Carey and Andrew Fuller would launch the Modern Missions Movement. The reverberations of Calvin’s sixteenth century pulpit are still being felt around the world to this day.

Given such a lasting and worldwide effect, what can be said about the preaching of Calvin? What are the salient features of his timeless pulpit? What distinguished his Bible exposition? Certain leading indicators can be cited that define and describe his approach to preaching.

THE FOUNDATION OF CALVIN’S PREACHING

The underlying foundation of Calvin’s preaching is his unwavering commitment to the authority of Scripture itself. Calvin believed that when the gospel is preached, “it is as if God Himself spoke in person.”²⁰ In other words, he maintained with Augustine that when the Bible speaks, God speaks. This was the solid rock upon which Calvin stood in the pulpit. This foundational commitment to God’s Word involved the following features.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The chief cornerstone of Calvin’s preaching was his utter submission to the supreme authority of the Scripture. T. H. L. Parker writes, “For Calvin, the message of Scripture is sovereign,

[both] sovereign over the congregation and sovereign over the preacher. His humiliation is seen by his submitting to this authority.”²¹ This sixteenth century Reformer believed that the Bible is “the infallible rule of His holy truth” and “the unchangeable oracles of our heavenly Master.”²² Calvin maintained that God’s Word is “eternal, unchangeable, and incorruptible and cannot, like the rain, vanish away.”²³ With the immutable standard established, he claims, “Nothing is more precious to [God] than His own truth.”²⁴ Calvin further declared, “God is not to be separated from His Word.”²⁵ As with all great men of God, the Scripture held a preeminent place, not only in Calvin’s pulpit, but in his heart as well.

It was to the Scripture that Calvin was firmly anchored. Commenting on this point, D’Aubigné notes, “In Calvin’s view everything that had not for its foundation the Word of God was futile and ephemeral boast, and the man who did not lean on Scripture ought to be deprived of his title of honor.”²⁶ The great Reformer himself said, “As soon as men depart even in the smallest degree from God’s Word, they cannot preach anything but falsehoods, vanities, imposters, errors, and deceits.”²⁷ Calvin was resolute when he asserted, “A rule is prescribed to all God’s servants that they bring not their own inventions but simply deliver as from hand to hand what they have received from God.”²⁸ Elsewhere, he affirmed, “The office of teaching is committed to pastors for no other purpose than that God may be heard there.”²⁹ God Himself is heard, Calvin contends, whenever His people gather to hear His Word preached. Therefore, Calvin maintained, “No one then ought to be deemed a sound teacher, but he who speaks from God’s mouth.”³⁰ Calvin was unwavering concerning the primacy of the Word of God in preaching. All preaching *must* be *biblical* preaching—no exceptions.

The sacred duty of the preacher, Calvin believed, is confined to “Thus says the Lord”: “The minister’s whole task is limited to the mystery of God’s Word, their whole wisdom to the

knowledge of His Word, their whole eloquence to its proclamation.”³¹ With unrelenting resolve, he maintained, “When we enter the pulpit, it is not that we may bring our own dreams and fancies with us.”³² Thus, Calvin stood under the supreme authority of holy Scripture whenever he stepped into the pulpit. Unlike Rome, Calvin maintained that the church was to be under the Word, not the Word under the church.

EXHAUSTIVE STUDY

Further, Calvin knew the importance of diligently studying the Scripture before preaching. As a result of a brilliant mind and persistent study, Calvin possessed an “extensive and intensive knowledge of Scripture.”³³ Much of it he knew virtually by memory. John Leith writes, “He *knew* the Bible in his person, in his quick, in his mind.”³⁴ His thorough preparation consisted of reading the church fathers, the Scholastics, and his fellow Reformers, along with a careful exegesis of the biblical text. He also traced down cross-references, as well as digging into the historical background. Jones explains, “All of these thoughts were then sorted and stored in his amazing memory.”³⁵ Most of his arduous preparation was available to him by spontaneous recall.

In the pulpit, Calvin drew from his rigorous and many years of study. Emphasizing the necessity of preparing to preach, Calvin said, “If I should climb up into the pulpit without having designed to look at a book and frivolously imagine, ‘Ah well! when I get there God will give me enough to talk about,’ and I do not condescend to read, or to think about what I ought to declare, and I come here without carefully pondering how I must apply the Holy Scripture to the edification of the people—well, then I should be a cock-sure charlatan and God would put me to confusion in my audaciousness.”³⁶ If Calvin was anything, he was well-studied and thoroughly-prepared.

Before each sermon, Calvin also gave careful thought to the practical application of the biblical text. In his mind, he must give prior consider-

ation to its relevance for his listeners. Calvin said, “If I do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people, then I should be an arrogant upstart.”³⁷ In short, Calvin’s mind was submitted to the disciplined study and perceived importance of each passage of Scripture.

SPECIFIC TEXT

As Calvin ascended into the pulpit, he always had before him a specific biblical text. Depending upon its literary genre, the number of verses expounded would vary. On the whole, Calvin dealt with more verses from narrative passages, usually enough to cover a basic unit of the story. When preaching the prophets, he covered a smaller literary unit. And when expositing an epistle, he treated a smaller portion of usually a verse or two. But regardless the genre, Calvin always had a specific section of Scripture before him.

Along this line, Parker observes, “[Calvin’s] text will vary in length from a single verse to a whole passage of perhaps ten or a dozen verses. Not infrequently he will preach two or three consecutive sermons on one verse.... But the general rule was for two to four verses a sermon.”³⁸ Parker goes on to add, “Clause by clause, verse by verse, the congregation was led through the epistle or the prophecy or the narrative.”³⁹ As a result, Calvin’s sermons are not “mealy-mouthed commonplaces or sermons which he had up his sleeves to make them serve all passages of the Scripture, like a shoe for all feet, but expositions, true, pure, plain, and proper for the text which he had to explain.”⁴⁰ Without adding to or altering the verse(s), Calvin simply expounded what arose from the text.

These meaty expositions lasted at least one hour.⁴¹ Without any oratorical gimmicks, he merely explained and applied the biblical passage before him, closely following the text itself. He explained important Hebrew and Greek concepts, while making short applications. In his sim-

ple approach to the pulpit, Calvin believed “the preacher was but the mouth of God, expounding what God says in His Word.”⁴² He regarded preaching—explaining and applying the biblical text—as the primary means by which God’s presence and power is made real in the life of the listener.

SEQUENTIAL EXPOSITION

Further, Calvin was firmly committed to sequential, passage by passage, exposition through entire books in the Bible. Boice explains that Calvin’s sermons “were in the nature of continuous expositions. He began at the first verse of a Bible book and then treated it in successive sections, averaging four or five verses until he reached the end, at which point he began another book.”⁴³ This consecutive approach—*lectio continua*—reflected the ancient Christian practice of preaching through entire books from beginning to end, guaranteeing that he address the whole counsel of God. In this disciplined manner, controversial subjects were unavoidable. Hard sayings were inescapable. Difficult doctrines could not be bypassed. Calvin chose to explain every truth of Scripture as it appeared in the text and to reveal its relevance to his listeners.

During his three-year ministry in Strasbourg (1538-1541), Calvin preached through the Gospel of John and Romans entirely. Upon his return to Geneva in 1541, he preached through much of the New Testament. Beginning in 1549,⁴⁴ he preached through Acts (89 sermons, August 25, 1549-1550, 1552, 1553, 1554, 1555, 1560), and between 1555-1557, he expounded 1 Corinthians (110 sermons), 2 Corinthians (66 sermons, 1557), Galatians (43 sermons, 1557), Ephesians (48 sermons, 1558), 1 and 2 Thessalonians (55 sermons, 1554), 1 Timothy (55 sermons, 1554), 2 Timothy (31 sermons, 1555), Titus (17 sermons, 1555), and a harmony of the Synoptic Gospels (65 sermons between 1549, 1553, 1554-1555, 1559-1560, 1562-1564), a series stopped by his final illness and death.

Calvin also preached extensively from the Old Testament, expounding Genesis (123 sermons, September 4, 1559-1561), Deuteronomy (201 sermons, March 20, 1555-July 15, 1556), Judges (a shorter series in 1561), 1 Samuel (107 sermons, 1561-1562), and 2 Samuel (87 sermons, 1562-1563), 1 Kings (a lengthy series, 1563-1564), Job (159 sermons, February 26, 1554-March 1555), Psalms (72 sermons, 1549-1557, 1560), Psalm 119 (22 sermons, 1553), Isaiah (353 sermons, 1556-1559), Jeremiah (91 sermons, 1549), Lamentations (25 sermons, 1550), Ezekiel (175 sermons, 1552-1554), Daniel (47 sermons, 1552), Hosea (65 sermons, 1551), Joel (17 sermons, 1551), Amos (43 sermons, 1551-1552), Obadiah (5 sermons, 1552), Jonah (6 sermons, 1552), Micah (20 sermons, November 12, 1550-January 10, 1551), Nahum (we do not have the number), and Zephaniah (17 sermons, 1551). It is impossible to estimate the rich deposit of truth placed into those who gathered in Saint Pierre’s Cathedral by Calvin’s preaching.

Regarding this relentless constancy in the Word, Parker writes, “Sunday after Sunday, day after day, Calvin climbed the steps into the pulpit. There he patiently led his congregation verse by verse through book after book of the Bible.”⁴⁵ Parker added, “Almost all Calvin’s recorded sermons are connected series on books of the Bible.”⁴⁶ So committed was Calvin to consecutive exposition that when he returned to Geneva on September 13, 1541, after being banished for almost four years, he resumed his exposition at precisely the *next* verse. This is an indication of his firm commitment to sequential exposition. On another occasion, Calvin became ill while preaching through Isaiah and was out of the pulpit due to illness for some nine months, beginning October of 1558. But when he returned to the pulpit, almost a year later, he picked up at exactly the *next* verse. To be sure, there were no trite or trivial messages issued by Calvin, but only a steady diet of the Word was served from his pulpit.

THE FEATURES OF CALVIN'S PREACHING

Calvin was uniquely gifted in both the science and art of preaching. Regarding its science, this learned scholar was governed by the fixed laws of human language, skilled exegesis, and sound interpretation. Concerning the art of preaching, Calvin was well-versed in the principles of effective rhetoric and arresting communication. Calvin mastered both the substance and style of biblical exposition. Having received the finest liberal arts education of the day, he was especially adept at using the many literary devices and figures of speech available to the preacher.

STRAIGHTFORWARD INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of the sermon, Calvin's preaching was remarkably to the point. As he mounted the pulpit, there were no wasted words or needless verbosity. He spoke "with [an] ability to explain clearly, using only a few words."⁴⁷ Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, writes that his, "every word weighed a pound."⁴⁸ Thus, from the outset of the sermon, there was little flair, but what, Hywel Jones describes as, "a brief but lucid summary of his message on the immediately preceding passage."⁴⁹ Thus, "Calvin never spoke without filling the mind of the hearer with the most weighty sentiments."⁵⁰ With carefully chosen words, Calvin encapsulated the passage at hand, capturing the focus of his listeners.

In the introduction, Calvin was primarily establishing the context of his passage. He viewed every passage in light of the larger context of that particular book and the whole Bible. As a result, this proficient expositor preached in a style that was "easy for people to follow, using short, clear sentences."⁵¹ In this direct fashion, Calvin simply preached through books in the Bible, using, in his word, "brevity."⁵² That is to say, he desired to give a clear, simple explanation with an economy of words. Calvin usually introduced each sermon with a thesis statement of the passage that lay before him. At the outset, he succinctly stated

the main idea of his passage, distilling the central thrust of his text into a simple statement.

An example is seen in his sermon on Micah 3:5-8, in which Calvin says, "Now, from this text, as I have reiterated, we see how opposed our God is to having His Word falsified; for blinding the false prophets as He does is a harsh and stiff penalty, resulting in their being disowned by God."⁵³ "This message," Calvin states, "will deal with how opposed God is to the false teaching of false prophets."⁵⁴ By this introduction, the congregation knows that the entire sermon will follow this central theme. From the beginning of his message, his hearers knew the primary thrust of his passage and where this message would take them.

LIVELY DELIVERY

Calvin was intentionally energetic in his preaching style. For this passionate preacher, the pulpit was not the place for the monotone voice of a lecture. Calvin called such sermons "dead." As a result, he resisted the trend of the day, which was merely to read a sermon manuscript in a cold, lifeless manner. The great Reformer said, "It appears to me that there is very little preaching of a lively kind in the kingdom, but that the greater part of delivery by way of reading from a written discourse ... preaching ought not to be lifeless but lively, to teach, to exhort, to reprove."⁵⁵ He believed that preaching must come in demonstration of "lively power and energy."⁵⁶ Calvin held that preaching without passion is dangerous when he wrote, "Doctrine without zeal is either like a sword in the hand of a madman, or ... else it serves for vain and wicked boasting."⁵⁷ To be sure, a sermon must be dynamic in its delivery, a proclamation of truth accompanied by zeal.

In order to achieve this, Calvin stepped into the pulpit with nothing except a Bible. He had no written manuscript before his eyes. Neither was there a preaching outline, nor any sermon notes. When preaching from the Old Testament, he had only the Hebrew Scriptures; when preaching from the New, just the Greek. Hywel Jones comments,

“The sheer simplicity of the sight must have contributed greatly to the power of the occasion.”⁵⁸ Here was simply one man with a Bible alone, standing before the people, and then, Hughes Oliphant Old says, “the sermon itself was put together before the congregation.”⁵⁹ Extremely gifted by God, Calvin’s sermon came together in the pulpit with both lively passion and biblical precision.

Regarding Calvin’s delivery, Old writes, “Calvin did not have the warm personality of Luther. One does not find in Calvin the oratorical eloquence of Gregory of Nazianzus nor the lively imagination of Origen. He was hardly the dramatic public speaker that John Chrysostom was, nor did he have the magnetic personality of Bernard of Clairvaux. Gregory the Great was a natural-born leader, as was Ambrose of Milan, but that was not a gift Calvin had. Yet, few preachers have affected such a tremendous reform in the lives of their congregations as did the Reformer of Geneva.”⁶⁰ With that said, what Calvin *did* possess was a deep conviction that gripped his soul. He despised “oratorical flourishes” and “never quoted other authors.”⁶¹ All this was intended to make his preaching animated and energetic.

SOUND EXEGESIS

As Calvin stood before an open Bible, he expounded it with exegetical depth and theological precision. As one trained in law and classical literature, he gave careful attention to the meticulous interpretation of the passage before him. He always sought to discover the plain or literal meaning of his text, giving scrutiny to its historical background, original language, and grammatical structure. John Murray explained, “Calvin was the exegete of the Reformation, and in first rank of biblical exegetes of all time.”⁶² Philip Schaff adds, “Calvin is the founder of the modern grammatical, historical exegesis. He affirmed the sound and fundamental hermeneutical principle that the biblical authors, like all sensible writers, wish to convey to their readers—one definite thought

in words which they could understand.”⁶³ With remarkable powers of analysis, Calvin exegeted the biblical text with accuracy and proficiency.

In this pursuit, Calvin was firmly committed to discovering the meaning of the biblical text by giving attention to its grammatical structure, verb tenses, historical background, and geographical setting. He believed that to interpret the Scripture correctly, he must put himself into the mind of the biblical writer. Calvin wrote, “Since it is almost the interpreter’s only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound, he misses the mark or at least strays outside its limits by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the meaning of his author. It is presumptuous and almost blasphemous to turn the meaning of Scripture around as though it were some game that we are playing.”⁶⁴ This is to say, Calvin was determined to discover what the original intent of each passage. Further, Calvin held to the *analogia Scriptura*, which states that Scripture must be compared with Scripture to discover its true meaning, as it cannot contradict itself.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Prior to the Reformation, Medieval preachers had allegorized the biblical text with little restraint, seeking four levels of interpretation for any passage. But Calvin helped bring the church back to a more literal interpretation of the Bible. Certainly, the great Reformer allowed for figures of speech and symbols, as well as poetic and prophetic language. But Calvin held to the perspicuity of Scripture, meaning that what is most important in the Word is most clear. He once said, “The true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning.”⁶⁵ This vigilant exegete was not searching for a hidden meaning, but what the author plainly intended. Calvin believed the Bible is lucid in its teaching. The proper interpretation of a text, Calvin held, was its clearest meaning.

Prioritizing a plain interpretation, Calvin maintained, “I have observed ... a simple style of teaching.... I have felt nothing to be of more

importance than a literal interpretation of the biblical text.⁶⁶ To this point, Schaff writes, “Calvin kept constantly in view the primary and fundamental aim of the interpreter, namely, to bring to light the true meaning of the biblical authors according to the laws of thought and speech. He transferred himself into their mental state and environment so as to become identified with them, and let them explain what they actually did say, and not what they might or should have said.”⁶⁷ Thus, Calvin argues that the Bible speaks in literal terms, and he must allow it to speak for itself.

Not until the proper interpretation has been established can the right application be made. Recognizing this priority, David Puckett notes, “Calvin rarely loses sight of the fact that before one can explain how a passage applies to the person of the sixteenth century, he must determine first what its meaning was for the original writers’ contemporaries.”⁶⁸ Context should be a leading indicator of the right interpretation. Puckett further adds, “In larger textual units, Calvin almost always favors the interpretation that he believes best suits the context. Any interpretation that cannot be justified contextually is at best improbable.”⁶⁹ Calvin states, “The important thing is that the Scripture should be understood. How it is explained is secondary.”⁷⁰ The bottom line is that the Geneva Reformer prioritized substance over style and interpretation over application.

FAMILIAR LANGUAGE

Calvin exhibited the virtue of being easily understood in the pulpit. Boice states, “His words are straightforward, the sentences simple. This is because Calvin understood his calling, as well as that of all other preachers, to make the biblical text as clear as possible to his hearers.”⁷¹ Jones likewise adds, “his vocabulary was non-technical.”⁷² It has been said that Calvin’s communication was directed to the common man, “heavy with the smells and tastes and sights of every day life in city and country and was clearly observant of the

smallest things in the life of his people.”⁷³ For this caring shepherd, there was no glory in preaching over the heads of his listeners. Being unintelligible was the error of Rome, not the Reformers.

Regarding this readily accessible style, d’Aubigné writes, “Calvin was neither a Dracon⁷⁴ nor a Lycurgus;⁷⁵ neither a political orator nor a statesman. His pulpit was no tribune for harangues; his work was not that of a secret chief of Protestantism.”⁷⁶ That is to say, this Frenchman was not overbearing in the pulpit, but easily understood. Parker explains that Calvin nearly always used familiar and easy language; “He is so intent on making himself understood that now and then he will think it necessary to explain a simple word which is nevertheless ambiguous.”⁷⁷ His vocabulary was “non-technical.”⁷⁸ Parker adds, “The word that Calvin used to describe what he regarded as the most suitable style for the preacher is *familière*.”⁷⁹ By this word, Calvin meant personal, to make the message a personal matter and not just a collection of historical ideas.

Despite the superior force of his mind—Gordon writes, “he never felt he had encountered an intellectual equal”⁸⁰—Calvin’s preaching was neither encyclopedic nor elitist, but was readily understandable and easily digested. Calvin stated that preachers must be like fathers, “dividing bread into small pieces to feed their children.”⁸¹ Calvin understood the importance of coherent speech in bite-size portions that feeds the flock.

SKILLED RHETORIC

Aiding his intelligible delivery, Calvin used the many rhetorical devices at his disposal. Leith writes, “His sermons are replete with metaphors, comparisons, proverbial images, and wisdom that appeal to the imagination.”⁸² Put another way, his sermons were “full ... of analogies taken from realms of ordinary human experience.”⁸³ In so doing, Calvin employed a rich variety of literary tools that made his preaching interesting, arresting, and compelling. He used vivid expressions to enhance imagery in his listeners’ minds. Most

frequently, he “assimilated the metaphors and images of the Bible, its concepts and nuances.”⁸⁴ In addition, he stirred the imagination of his congregation with word pictures that had military, judicial, natural, artisan, or academic connotations. He often flavored his sermons with colloquial expressions used in everyday life that were sure to pique the interest of his parishioners. Calvin rarely used humor, but his biting sarcasm was sure to draw a smile or shock the listener, leaving a lasting impression.

Calvin also skillfully employed thought-provoking questions. He made “constant use of the interrogative in which he engages his congregation.”⁸⁵ Some questions were rhetorical, requiring no answers. Other questions, Calvin chose to answer. Sometimes he posed questions in rapid-fire succession to provoke the thinking of his listeners. At other times, Calvin would raise an objection by an imaginary objector and, then, issue a biblical reply. For example, he might say, “Now, here one could ask” and subsequently address what he knew his listeners were surely thinking.

Another rhetorical device implemented by Calvin was to restate a verse or statement in alternative words. According to Ford Lewis Battles, Calvin was a superb explicator of Scripture because he was “a master of the paraphrase”⁸⁶ by which he could restate Scripture “with precision and clarity, translating it into the language of the common human discourse of his own time.”⁸⁷ Calvin’s signature formula that introduced a restatement was, “It is as if he was saying ...,” or “In effect, he is saying ...,” or “In other words....” This literary technique was especially successful in the pulpit where repetition is an effective teacher.

SEAMLESS TRANSITION

A skilled speaker, Calvin spoke with smooth transitions as he proceeded from one main thought to the next. Avoiding abrupt and awkward breaks in his sermon, Calvin would con-

struct appropriate words and phrases to serve as bridges in communication, gracefully leading the listener to the next heading of truth. In using such techniques, he added polish to his already profound messages. By this method, Calvin established the uninterrupted flow of his thought and made sure that his sermons were skillfully woven together.

Consider some of the transitional phrases from his sermon on Micah 1:1-2. Calvin pulled his listeners along as he introduced new paragraphs of thought with the following segues:

At the same time.... Furthermore.... But let us consider.... It is time now, to summarize.... In addition, we might wonder why.... Now it is quite true that.... On the contrary.... From this example it can be seen that.... Accordingly, we should infer from the foregoing that.... Now from this text we glean.... But, on the contrary, one finds.... We now come to what the prophet adds.... In the meanwhile, let us note.... That, I say, is how proud and presumptuous.... Now the prophet specifically says to them.... That is the similarity that the prophet alludes to here.... In truth.... Having said that, however, we should note....⁸⁸

Clearly, this trained scholar was no sterile exegete, devoid of communication skills. Instead, Calvin was an adept and accomplished conveyor of biblical truth.

THE RELEVANCE OF CALVIN’S PREACHING

For Calvin, Scripture must not only be properly interpreted, but rightly applied to his congregation. Herman Selderhuis writes, “Calvin’s strength lay in the way he applied the text to the situation of his listeners. His sermons built bridges between the past and the present.”⁸⁹ On this subject, Parker explains, “Expository preaching consists in the explanation and application of a passage of Scripture. Without explanation it is not

expository; without application it is not preaching.”⁹⁰ Both explanation and application are absolutely necessary. With that said, let us turn now to the application of Scripture in Calvin’s preaching.

PASTORAL ENCOURAGEMENT

As a preacher, Calvin sought warmly to encourage his listeners with his expositions. He never lost sight of the fact that he was a pastor feeding his needy flock. Calvin was consciously aware that he was a shepherd addressing *real* people with *real* needs. Hundreds of his listeners had escaped from bloody persecution in France, England, and Scotland to come to Geneva, which had become an international city of refuge. Among them were John Knox, Myles Coverdale, William Whittingham, and Thomas Bodley, men who had fled Bloody Mary to find protection in this Reformed city. Such was hardly the time to browbeat an already-beleaguered people avoiding persecution. Calvin’s listeners desperately needed pastoral edification. Thus, instead of berating his congregation for their shortcomings, compassionate pastor sought to build them up.

With noticeable humility, Calvin even included himself in the call to self-examination and repentance. Commenting on Calvin’s tone in the pulpit, Parker writes,

There is no threshing himself into a fever of impatience or frustration, no holier-than-thou rebuking of the people, no begging them in terms of hyperbole to give some physical sign that the message has been accepted. It is simply one man, conscious of his sins, aware how little progress he makes and how hard it is to be a doer of the Word, sympathetically passing on to his people (whom he knows to have the same sort of problems as himself) what God has said to them and to him.⁹¹

Calvin sought to lavish grace upon his listeners, not guilt.

For example, listen to Calvin’s call for self-examination and how he included himself in the

appeal:

We must all, therefore, examine our lives, not against one of God’s precepts but against the whole Law. Can any of us truly say today we are blameless? Or, this was not written for the benefit of the Galatians. Therefore, we must apply today. If each of us was to examine ourselves carefully, we would find that we are all stained with sin until God cleanses us.⁹²

With the repeated use of *we* in these exhortations, Calvin’s encouraging tone is clearly revealed in his searching appeals.

CHALLENGING REBUKE

Calvin would also issue loving rebuke from the pulpit when correction was needed. Selderhuis notes, “But he claimed to aim at moderation in such rebukes.”⁹³ His pastoral concern sometimes included firm love. Consequently, loving admonition often distinguished Calvin’s preaching when he was aware that members of his flock were entangled in sin, but he did it carefully “so as not to bruise the souls with immoderate harshness.”⁹⁴ He openly attacked vice, despite knowing that his words would probably provoke anger. But this proponent of the truth did so knowing that personal holiness was their greatest good.

In this spirit, Calvin confronted the worldliness and immorality of the people. For example, there were times when Calvin saw the French Huguenots living lives of carnality in Geneva and called for their repentance, stating,

Those who have come from afar should set themselves to behave in a holy manner as in the house of God. They could have stayed elsewhere to live in such debauchery; it was not necessary that they move from Catholicism to live such a dissolute life. And, in fact, there are some for whom it would have been better to have divorced themselves from the collar than to have ever set foot in this church to have behaved so badly.⁹⁵

In other words, Calvin was so persistent in opposing sin that he declared, as Scripture itself taught, that self-mutilation should be preferred over entering the church in open sin.

On another occasion, Calvin added,

There are households where husband and wife are like cat and dog; there are some who try to “heighten” their own importance and imitate the lords without reason, and have given themselves to pomp and world superfluity. Others become so “delicate” that they don’t know how to work anymore, and are no longer content with any foods. There are some gossipers and “bad mouthers” who would find something to say against the angel of paradise; and in spite of the fact they are “bursting” with vices, they want to put all their “holiness” into controlling (“blessing”) their neighbors. Nevertheless, it seems to them all that God must be pleased with the fact that they made the voyage to Geneva, as if it would not have been better for them to stay on their manure than to come to commit such scandalous acts in the church of God.⁹⁶

Such challenging words were meant for their good, namely, their sanctification.

POLEMIC CONFRONTATION

As a guardian of the truth, Calvin was a heroic defender of the Christian faith. This stalwart of the gospel was convinced he *must* resist the many enemies who would attack its purity. Believing the Bible to be a sharp, two-edged sword that cuts both ways, he wrote, “For to assert the truth is only one-half of the office of teaching, because Satan ever leads his ministers to corrupt the pure doctrine with falsehoods. It is not then enough to proclaim the truth itself, except all the fallacies of the devil be also dissipated.”⁹⁷ He believed that preaching the Word necessitated confronting the devil’s lies in their many forms. To this end, Calvin said, “The pastor ought to have two voices: one, for gathering the sheep; and another, for warding off and driving away wolves and

thieves.”⁹⁸ In his mind, the full weight of Scripture must be brought to bear against all error that would corrupt the gospel.

For example, Calvin did not hesitate to denounce the blasphemies of the Roman Catholic Church. In his sermon on Gal 1:1-2, Calvin announced, “The Roman Catholic Church today continues the same kind of idolatrous practices that were common amongst the heathen, but in the name of the apostles and of the virgin Mary. The only things that have changed are the names of the idols! But superstition is as wicked and detestable today as it was amongst the first idolaters!”⁹⁹ Then Calvin further declared,

The Pope and all his followers are found guilty of falsifying and corrupting the whole teaching of the gospel.... The entire system is built on lies and gross deception, for they have been bewitched by Satan himself, as most of us are already aware. But what cloak does Satan use to cover all this evil? It is the notion that there has been a continuous succession since the days of the apostles; thus these bishops represent the apostles today in the church, and whatever they say must be accepted.¹⁰⁰

Calvin not only taught sound doctrine, but he refuted those who contradict the truth.

EVANGELISTIC APPEAL

Toward the unregenerate, Calvin was fervently evangelistic in his pulpit ministry, extending the gospel to those without Christ. D’Aubigné notes, “He was before all things an evangelist, a minister of the living God.”¹⁰¹ To put it bluntly, Calvin was *not* a hyper-Calvinist. He did not hide the gospel from his listeners until they showed concern for their souls. Preaching, Calvin believed, must repeatedly offer Christ to unbelievers and call them to faith. Such gospel presentations should be extended so powerful, he reasoned, that “if an unbeliever enter, he may be so effectually arrested and convinced, as to give glory to God.”¹⁰² He continually demonstrated this free offer of the

gospel in his preaching. This Genevan Reformer persuaded and pleaded with sinners that they *must* come to faith in Jesus Christ.

The fact is, the high doctrines of Calvin's pulpit never diminished his evangelism, but only emboldened it. With an eye on God's sovereignty, Calvin said, "There is nothing which we ought to desire more earnestly than that the whole world should bow to the authority of God."¹⁰³ Accordingly, he knew that such submission necessitates the preaching of the gospel. Calvin wrote, "God begets and multiplies His Church only by means of His Word.... It is by the preaching of the grace of God alone that the Church is kept from perishing."¹⁰⁴ Elsewhere, Calvin stated, "The Gospel is preached indiscriminately to the elect and to the reprobate; but the elect alone come to Christ, because they have been 'taught by God.'"¹⁰⁵ To accuse Calvin of being non-evangelistic is to be ignorant of him and his preaching.

At the end of his sermons, Calvin would often give a fervent evangelistic appeal. Listen to one such gospel presentation in his sermon on Gal 2:15-16. With emphatic urging, Calvin pleaded with his listeners,

Let us, therefore, understand that there is no salvation whatsoever outside of Jesus Christ, for He is the beginning and the end of faith; and He is all in all. Let us continue in humility knowing that we can only bring condemnation upon ourselves. Therefore, we need to put all that pertains to salvation in the pure and free mercy of God. We must be able to say that we are saved through faith. God the Father has appointed His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, that He might be both author and finisher of our salvation. We are to deny ourselves and give ourselves to Him wholly and completely that all the praise might belong to Him.¹⁰⁶

Because Calvin understood the deep truths of God's Word, he preached the gospel with heart-stirring persuasion, urging unbelievers to cast

themselves on God's sovereign mercy.

THE PINNACLE OF CALVIN'S PREACHING

The primary goal of Calvin's preaching was never to bring God down to the level of his listeners, but rather to take them up before His throne of grace. In Calvin's mind, both he and those who sat under his preaching must be awestruck with the supreme majesty and infinite glory of God. The entire sermon must maintain this theocentric focus, Calvin believed, but this is especially seen in the dramatic conclusions of his sermons.

GOD-CENTERED THRUST

As the exposition concluded, Calvin was intensely God-centered. Rather than tapering off, the message actually escalated at the end, as he lifted high the banner of *soli Deo gloria*. Calvin said, "The proclaiming of [God's] glory on the earth is the very end of our existence."¹⁰⁷ As God's greatness must be the highest aim of preaching, so it must be to the very end of the sermon. Calvin's aim to glorify God was the overriding thrust of his many expositions. Calvin stressed, "The majesty of God is ... indissolubly connected with the public preaching of His truth."¹⁰⁸ Again, Calvin asserted, "Teachers cannot firmly execute their office except they have the majesty of God before their eyes."¹⁰⁹ This singular preoccupation with the supremacy of God saturated his preaching.

To the finish, Calvin maintained this emphatic God-centered thrust. Calvin would always conclude his preaching by pointing his congregation upward to the supreme greatness of God. Virtually every sermon peaked with such a lofty thrust. In one such example, Calvin cried out, "Now let us fall before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our faults, and praying that it may please Him to make us increasingly conscious of them, that we might be brought to a better repentance. May we, who have been regenerated, really feel that we are being led by the Holy Spirit."¹¹⁰ Almost every exposition by this magisterial Reformer left

his hearers fixed with this upward gaze toward God.

GOD-EXALTING TRANSCENDENCE

Having lifted the peoples' focus upon the Lord, Calvin would conclude his sermon with a pastoral prayer, elevating his congregation before the throne of grace. With his final intercession, he would leave them *coram deo*, "before the face of God." Calvin would ask that God lavish His rich mercy upon them. As the sermon concluded, the worshipers were left in heavenly places before God's throne. "Here we have the secret of Calvin's greatness and the source of his strength unveiled to us," B. B. Warfield writes, "No man ever had a profounder sense of God than did he."¹¹ This exalted view of God towered over Calvin's preaching and the people. His passionate preoccupation with the glory of God gave Calvin's message an arresting sense of transcendence, wonder, and amazement toward God.

In this present hour, preachers must recover a soaring vision of the supremacy of God over all things. Such men alone will deliver sermons that are radically life-changing and history-altering. If the church today is to witness a new reformation, then pastors must reclaim the high ground of God's infinite holiness and absolute sovereignty over all human history. Such lofty thoughts of God's glory must captivate preachers and the people once more. Only such deep theology can produce high doxology in humbled hearts.

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS LATER

Despite the many difficulties he faced, John Calvin remained faithful to the end in preaching the Word. In the last months of his life, the great herald of truth grew so weak that he had to be carried from his home through the streets of Geneva to Saint Pierre's Cathedral. His last sermon was preached on February 6, 1564, when violent coughing interrupted his message and blood gushed into his mouth. He was forced to step down from the pulpit, and his congregation

realized that he would never enter it again. The time, at last, had come for Calvin to lay down the invincible weapon of spiritual warfare—the preached Word—and enter the presence of his glorious Lord. On May 27, 1564, Calvin died. According to his humble request, he was buried in an unmarked grave.

A PULPIT WITH LASTING INFLUENCE

Calvin's preaching is nearly five hundred years removed, and yet its impact remains a strong force to the present hour. A study of the last five centuries reveals that Calvin's sermons, drawn from the rich mines of Scripture, helped fashion the reformation of the church and lay the foundations of Western civilization. Calvin the preacher—this is the Calvin who towers over church history with monumental importance.

This study of Calvin's preaching should kindle our longing for a new generation of preachers that will arise and preach as did this great man of God so long ago. The Geneva Reformer remains one of the greatest models, if not *the* greatest, for recapturing the power of biblical preaching. A decisive return to the preaching that is Bible-based, God-exalting, Christ-centered, and Spirit-empowered requires men cut from the same bolt of cloth as Calvin. We *must* have such valiant men who are ready to stand in pulpits and boldly proclaim the full counsel of the Word.

"WE WANT AGAIN CALVINS"

Let us hear the plea of Charles H. Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, spoken over a century ago:

We want again Luthers, Calvins, Bunyans, Whitefields, men fit to mark eras, whose names breathe terror in our foemen's ears. We have dire need of such. Whence will they come to us? They are the gifts of Jesus Christ to the church, and will come in due time. He has power to give us back again a golden age of preachers, and when the good old truth is once more preached by men

whose lips are touched as with a live coal from off the altar, this shall be the instrument in the hand of the Spirit for bringing about a great and thorough revival of religion in the land.¹¹²

O sovereign Lord, we entreat You to answer Spurgeon's heartfelt prayer once again in this day.

We *must* have Calvins again. And by God's grace, we shall see them raised up again by the Head of the church. May He give us legions of biblical expositors, as in the days of the Reformation, ready to unleash the unvarnished truth of Scripture. May we see the power of the Word preached again in this midnight hour of history. *Post tenebras lux*—after darkness, light.

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