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OF THE REFORMATION

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PROJECT

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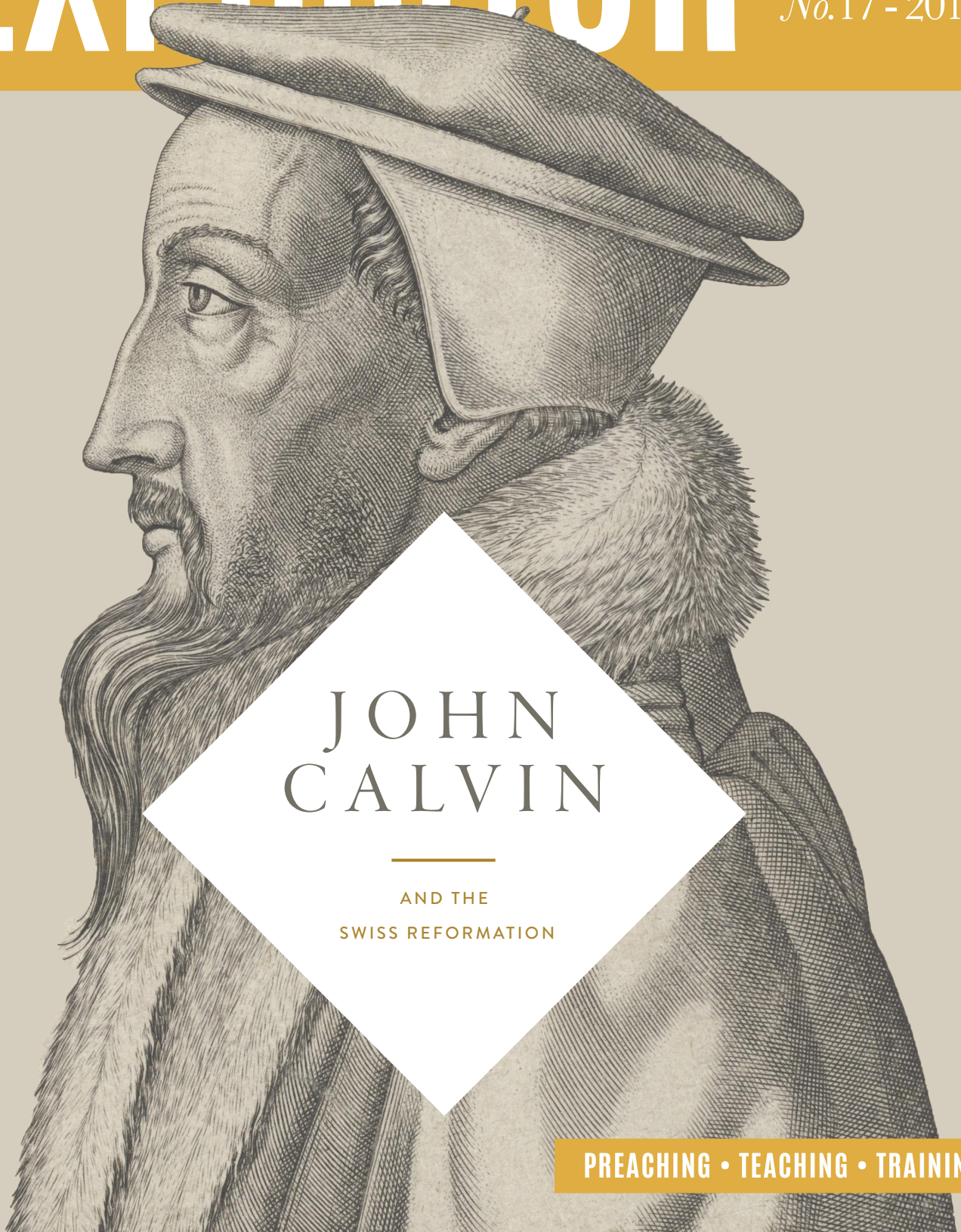
SHAWN WRIGHT

# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF  
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MAY / JUNE

No. 17 - 2017



## JOHN CALVIN

AND THE  
SWISS REFORMATION

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# A THEOLOGIAN for the AGES

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

When Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517, an eight-year-old French boy was standing in the shadows of obscurity, being groomed for the Catholic priesthood in northeast France. That boy would become, arguably, the most important theologian in the history of the church.



Furthermore, Luther's mantle as leader of the Reformation would eventually fall on his shoulders, and he would greatly advance the Protestant movement Luther had begun. His name was John Calvin.

Calvin is easily the most important Protestant theologian of all time and remains one of the truly great men who have lived. A world-class theologian, a renowned teacher, an ecclesiastical statesman, and a valiant Reformer, Calvin is seen by many as the greatest influence on the church since the first century. Apart from the biblical authors themselves, Calvin stands as the most influential minister of the Word the world has ever seen. Philip Melancthon revered him as the most able interpreter of Scripture in the church, and therefore labeled him simply "the theologian."

And Charles Spurgeon said that Calvin "propounded truth more clearly than any other man that ever breathed, knew more of Scripture, and explained it more clearly." Is it any wonder that over five hundred years later, we are still reading the profound sermons, writings, and treatises of this theological genius?

The legacy of John Calvin extends around the world and across the years. The Genevan Reformer left a standard of sound doctrine for the church that endures to this day. At the heart of his teaching were the God-exalting truths of the doctrines of grace. This is to say, Calvin preached the majestic glory of an awesome and transcendent God who sovereignly rules over all. He was emphatically God-centered in his understanding of divine truth. By this conviction, Calvin alongside the other Reformers, restored the truth of the sovereignty of God to its rightful place in the life of the church.

Furthermore, Calvin maintained that everything in life—every decision, every activity, every duty—must be done to the glory of God. In Calvin's worldview, the glory of God is the *sum-mum bonum*, the highest good. Calvin sought to make God's glory the chief aim and ultimate end in everything, and he pursued this lofty goal with a steadfast commitment. In his estimation, the glory of God is nowhere more radiantly displayed than in the sovereign choice and eternal salvation of God's elect, those purchased by Christ, regenerated by the Spirit, and preserved throughout all the ages to come.

It is my pleasure to invite you to devour this issue of *Expositor*, highlighting the preaching, piety, teaching, and pastoral labors of John Calvin. May the Lord give His church today a new generation of men and women who, like Calvin, possess a singular vision for God's supreme majesty and glory. May such valiant servants be used by God to build His church in the nations of the world. ♦

*Steven J. Lawson*



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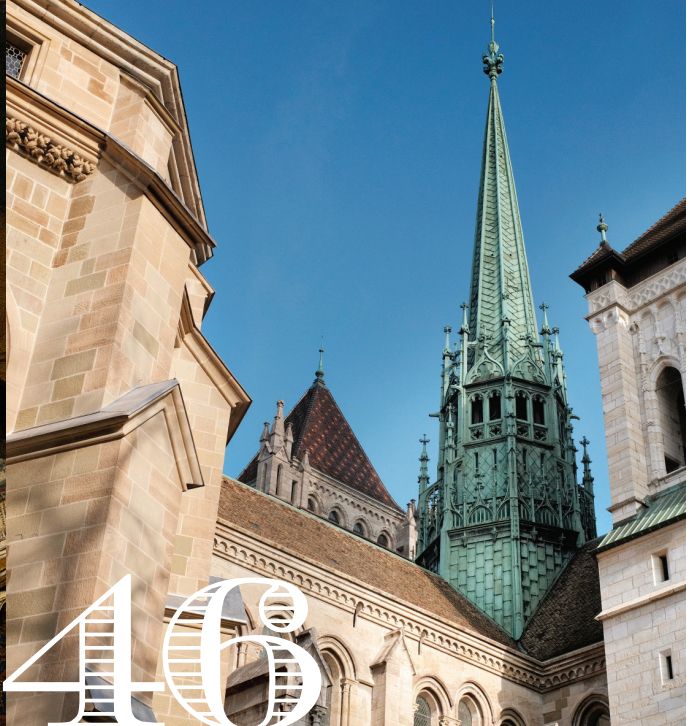
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JOHN CALVIN:  
POWERFUL EXPOSITOR  
*of the* REFORMATION

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STEVEN J. LAWSON

**G**iven the prolific nature of John Calvin's vast pulpit ministry, it would be virtually impossible to overestimate the importance of his expository preaching. During the Protestant movement of the sixteenth century, Calvin was many things—a world-class theologian, revered exegete, renowned teacher, master commentator, ecclesiastical statesman, and influential Reformer. But first and foremost, Calvin was a pastor, the faithful shepherd of one local flock in Geneva for twenty-five years. Amid his many pastoral duties, Calvin was primarily a preacher of the Word—a biblical expositor of the highest order.

During the days of his well-known Genevan ministry, Calvin viewed the pulpit as his principle responsibility and the primary work of his pastoral calling. He gave himself to the exposition of the Word as perhaps no one else in history. No man before or since this Genevan expositor has been so prolific in his handling of Scripture. Apart from the biblical authors themselves, Calvin stands today as, arguably, the most influential minister of the Word of God that the world has ever seen. On his deathbed, Calvin reviewed the many accomplishments of his life, and it was his sermons that he mentioned as greater than even his vast collection of writings. For Calvin, preaching was his primary ministry and the driving passion of his life.

### The Real Calvin

Emile Doumergue, the foremost biographer of Calvin, stood in the great Reformer's pulpit in 1909 to mark the four hundredth anniversary of Calvin's birth, 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, molding by his words the spirit of the Reformed of the sixteenth century." In that same memorable address, Doumergue remarked:

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 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.

The noted Reformation historian JH. Merle D'Aubigne



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concurred, stating that the real Calvin was the biblical expositor who considered the pulpit to be "the heart of his ministry." For Calvin, the pulpit was the central force driving all other ministry efforts.

A highly regarded expositor in his own right, James Montgomery Boice observed that the pulpit endeavors of Calvin were the chief weapons in his arsenal:

Calvin had no weapon but the Bible . . . 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.

### A Second Generation Reformer

Before we consider the preaching of the famed Swiss Reformer, we must place him within the proper historical context. Calvin was born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France, twenty-six years after the birth of noted German Reformer Martin Luther. At age fourteen, he embarked upon his studies at the University of Paris in preparation to be a priest in the Catholic Church. But when Calvin's father had a falling out with the church, he redirected his son, now age nineteen, into the study of law. Young Calvin pursued a degree in law at the universities of Orleans and Bourges, not knowing what lay just ahead.

Calvin's father died in May of 1531, when Calvin was twenty-one, freeing him to change his degree to study his real love, classical literature. During this time, Calvin was

exposed to the truths of the Reformation that had been rediscovered under Luther, and the young French-born student was suddenly and unexpectedly converted to faith in Jesus Christ in approximately 1533.

This dramatic conversion put Calvin on a totally different path, now pursuing the study of theology. Under persecution in Paris, Calvin fled and soon wrote his *magnum opus*, a seminal work entitled *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Written when Calvin was only twenty-six years of age, *Institutes* would undergo four expanded revisions and become the single most important work of the Reformation, standing even today as a towering work from which all students of biblical theology can benefit.

#### **Pastor in Geneva Exiled**

After finding refuge in Basel, Switzerland, an unexpected providence while traveling to Strasbourg rerouted Calvin to Geneva for the night. He was recognized as the author of the *Institutes* and was challenged to stay and further the cause of the Reformation in that city, which he did. But Calvin only lasted two years (1536–1538) as the pastor. He preached that the Bible required a life lived consistent with one's profession of faith in Christ in order to partake in the Lord's Table, and he was subsequently run out of town by many who opposed this simple, doctrinal teaching.

Exiled from Geneva, Calvin fled to Strasbourg, where he pastored a French-speaking congregation. After preaching through Romans, he wrote his first commentary on this important epistle, which marked the beginning of his lifelong commentary project. There he met a widow, Idelette de Bure, in his church and was married. When the Catholic Church tried to recapture Geneva, the city fathers appealed to Calvin, and it became apparent that they needed him to return. Though he said he would rather die a thousand deaths than return, he humbled himself and did so, choosing to serve the greater good to the glory of God.

#### **Back in Geneva**

Back in Geneva in 1541, Calvin famously resumed his preaching ministry after a three-and-a-half-year departure, picking up in the verse which immediately followed the one where he had previously left off. This was an intentional statement that his ministry would be an exposition of the full counsel of God. For the next twenty-three

## For Calvin, the Bible was pure, unadulterated truth without any mixture of error.

years, Calvin anchored himself in this Reformation city, exerting an influence that would spread to England, Scotland, and the rest of Europe, even traversing the Atlantic to the American colonies and beyond. This brilliant minister would become a world-class theologian, master communicator, and skilled expositor.

During these days of pastoral ministry, Calvin established the Genevan Academy for the training of ministers, lawyers, physicians, and teachers. He trained preachers in his auditorium across the street from St. Pierre's Cathedral, the very church where he preached. Out of this auditorium came the *Geneva Bible*, the first study Bible of its kind with side reference notes. This English translation would be the Bible of choice for the next one hundred years in the English-speaking world, favored by Shakespeare, the Pilgrims, and many more.

#### **Faithful to the End**

Though these were prolific years of ministry, they also were years of mounting difficulty and constant trials for Calvin. He faced many challenges from the godless Libertines over their demands to come to the Lord's Table despite their licentious lifestyle. This time period also saw the ordeal involving the trial and execution of the heretic Michael Serevetus, which required Calvin to be an expert witness. Calvin engaged in the ongoing struggle with the Catholic Church over the battle for the truth of the gospel, and even greater, he suffered the deaths of his wife, Idelette, and young son, Jacques. This heroic figure also endured many physical ailments, including severe migraine headaches, gout, and much more. By the end, the elders would carry Calvin to the church to preach, as he was no longer able to walk there on his own.

In May of 1564, Calvin came to the end of his life's



journey. With the elders and pastors of Geneva gathered around his death bed, he passed into the presence of the Lord, strong in faith and resilient in his will to glorify God. His contribution to the spread of sound doctrine and biblical exposition towers over the centuries to this day, and the worldwide influence of his life and ministry may never be surpassed. Even among giants, Calvin's ministry stands taller, and the church owes an enormous debt to this great hero of the faith.

As we delve into the preaching of this magisterial Reformer, we must take note of the distinguishing marks of his pulpit ministry. Ten determinate features of his preaching set Calvin apart.

### **Biblical Foundation**

Calvin stood firmly on one of the formal principles of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, meaning Scripture alone. This principle was the chief cornerstone of the Reformation, and it was never more exemplified than in the pulpit ministry of this Genevan Reformer.

Calvin believed that the chief mandate of the minister was to hold the Word of God and preach its message. He wrote, "[Ministers'] whole task is limited to the ministry of God's Word; their whole wisdom to the knowledge of His Word; their whole eloquence, to its proclamation." In other words, Calvin believed the preacher has nothing to say apart from the Word of God. Reformation historian JH. Merle D'Aubigne correctly stated, "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." Simply put, he believed that when the Bible speaks, God speaks, and does so with the authority of His own sovereignty.

This fundamental commitment to biblical preaching was grounded in his belief in the authority of Scripture. Calvin knew that he had no authority in and of himself, but that it lay entirely in the Scripture. He said, "When we enter the pulpit, it is not so that we may bring our own dreams and fancies with us." He maintained, "As soon as men depart even in the smallest degree from God's Word, they cannot preach anything but falsehoods, vanities, impostures, errors, and deceits." In other words, Calvin was firmly convinced that the preacher must preach the Word of God or else be removed from the pulpit.

Consequently, Calvin saw himself as merely a dispatched messenger who had been entrusted with a divine message, bringing nothing else into the pulpit except the written Word of God. He stated, "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." This understanding of the preacher's singular task to bring God's Word produced a profound sense of humility in Calvin. T. H. L. Parker, the foremost authority on Calvin's preaching, concurs: "For Calvin the message of Scripture is sovereign, sovereign over the congregation and sovereign over the preacher. His humility is shown by his submitting to this authority." It was the sheer majesty of Scripture and its supreme authority that produced such great reverence within Calvin for the preaching ministry. He knew he was standing on holy ground as he entered the pulpit and proclaimed the Word of God.

Thus, Calvin approached the pulpit with deep humility and reverential awe. He asserted, "The majesty of Scripture deserves that its expounders should make it apparent that they proceed to handle it with modesty and reverence." On another occasion, Calvin stressed the high reverence he had for the written Word of God: "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God because it has proceeded from Him alone, and has nothing of man mixed with it." For Calvin, the Bible was pure, unadulterated truth without any mixture of error. This is why, he believed, the Bible alone must be preached. He maintained, "The office of teaching is committed to pastors for no other purpose than that God alone may be heard there." That is, the pulpit is not a place where the opinions of men are to be heard. Instead, it is where the wisdom of God must be proclaimed. Calvin maintained, "No one ought to be deemed a sound teacher, but he who speaks from God's mouth." In other words, the expositor is simply a mouthpiece for the Word of God, which Calvin was faithfully throughout his ministry.

### **Sequential Exposition**

Given this commitment to preach the Scripture, the approach that Calvin used was principally to preach sequentially through entire books in the Bible. As was his practice, Calvin would begin at the beginning of a book in chapter one, verse one and move consecutively verse-by-verse, often phrase-by-phrase, through the entirety of the text. This practice of sequential exposition guaranteed that Calvin preached the full counsel of the Word of God. Controversial subjects were unavoidable, hard sayings could not be skipped, and difficult doctrines could not be overlooked. Calvin unabashedly preached the full breadth of the biblical message, to the soul-strengthening benefit of his parishioners.

Once the mature years of Calvin's ministry arrived, he preached from a New Testament book on Sunday morning followed by a New Testament book or a psalm on Sunday

afternoon. During his brief ministry at Strasbourg (1536–1541), Calvin preached through the Gospel of John and Romans. During his second Genevan ministry (1541–1564), he preached on a harmony of the synoptic Gospels (65 sermons, concluding when he died), Acts (189 sermons), 1 Corinthians (110 sermons), 2 Corinthians (66 sermons), Galatians (43 sermons), Ephesians (48 sermons), 1 and 2 Thessalonians (46 sermons), 1 Timothy (55 sermons), 2 Timothy (31 sermons), and Titus (17 sermons).

Calvin preached from the Old Testament every morning of the week, every other week. These Old Testament sermons were preached at six o'clock in the morning, or seven o'clock during the winter months. His Old Testament sermons included Genesis (123 sermons), Deuteronomy (201 sermons), Judges (a short series), 1 Samuel (107 sermons), 2 Samuel (87 sermons), 1 Kings (various sermons), Job (159 sermons), individual psalms (72 sermons), Psalm 119 (22 sermons), Isaiah (353 sermons), Jeremiah (91 sermons), Lamentations (25 sermons), Ezekiel (175 sermons), Daniel (47 sermons), Hosea (65 sermons), Joel (17 sermons), Amos (43 sermons), Obadiah (5 sermons), Jonah (6 sermons), Micah (28 sermons), Nahum (not recorded), and Zephaniah (17 sermons).

As Calvin preached consecutively through entire books in the Bible, he addressed every verse that lay before him. By this disciplined approach, no doctrine was left untaught, no sin unexposed, and no promise undelivered. As T. H. L. Parker writes, "Sunday after Sunday, day after day, Calvin climbed up the steps into the pulpit. There he patiently led his congregation verse by verse through book after book of the Bible." Noting Calvin's sequential approach to exposition, Parker adds, "Almost all Calvin's recorded sermons are connected series on books of the Bible." In the Introduction to *Calvin's Sermons on the Epistles to the Ephesians*, the editors observe, "The subject to be taught is the Word of God, and the best way to teach it . . . was by steady and methodical exposition, book after book." Almost the entirety of Calvin's pulpit ministry was made up of consecutive exposition through books in the Bible.

As mentioned before, one example of this unwavering verse-by-verse preaching is seen in Calvin's return to Geneva after his banishment three years earlier. In September 1541, Calvin reentered his Geneva pulpit and resumed his exposition exactly where he had stopped three years earlier, continuing his preaching at precisely the next verse. Another example occurred when Calvin became seriously ill in the first week of October 1558, not returning to the pulpit until Monday, June 12, 1559. When he resumed his preaching after a nine-month absence, he began at the very next verse in the book of Isaiah.

These two incidences reveal how fiercely committed Calvin was to sequential expository preaching. Boice writes, "Calvin's sermons usually lasted an hour and 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." This devotion to verse-by-verse preaching by the Swiss Reformer stands as a timeless example, one which should be followed by all who enter the pulpit.

### Direct Beginning

As Calvin began his sermons, he was remarkably straightforward and to the point. In his introduction, there was no triviality, no wasted statements, no dancing around the truth. His co-worker and successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, writes concerning his preaching, "Every word weighed a pound." It was characteristic of Calvin's sermons to start with a direct beginning, immediately drawing in his listeners to the biblical text. For the most part, Calvin began each message by reviewing his previous sermon, such as in the following examples from his expositions of Micah. A sample of his opening statements include: "Yesterday we saw how Micah proclaimed God's judgment against all unbelievers" and "yesterday we examined what Micah says here: that because of our malice and rebellion, we are deprived of salvation, and unless God Himself should teach us, we cannot endure for long." Calvin's purpose was to direct his listeners to the passage to be preached as quickly as possible, wasting no time with anything that did not directly relate to the biblical truth being taught.

Further examples of abbreviated beginnings are found when Calvin states, "We saw last time that we need to have confidence in the fact that the gospel is true." Typical of his direct introductions, he began on another occasion, "This morning we made a thorough examination of the fact that although the law could not justify us or make us acceptable to God, it was not established in vain." In this way, Calvin almost always connected the passage immediately before him to the verses that he had previously expounded.

Having established the context of his passage, Calvin then introduced the congregation to the mindset of the biblical author and his original recipients. One example of Calvin's practice of establishing the context can be seen in the following sermon on Galatians:

Earlier, we saw that the Galatians had gone astray, despite having been faithfully taught by Paul, who had labored diligently among them. It was not that they had completely renounced Jesus Christ, nor indeed


the gospel, but rather that they had allowed themselves to be deceived so easily, and to follow false doctrines (which happens to be a very common occurrence!). They still met in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and practiced baptism as a sign of faith, but they had defiled their religion by adding superstition and idolatry. Thus, the Galatians still referred to themselves as part of the church of God, but had become enmeshed by many foolish teachings.

Included in Calvin's introductions was also a statement of the central theme. This is sometimes called the thesis statement, or main claim of the sermon, which is drawn from the passage at hand. Such a proposition announced the distilled essence of the message in succinct form. For example, in the introduction to a sermon on Micah, Calvin summarizes by stating, "Now from this text, as I have reiterated, we see how opposed our Lord 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." By stating his theme in the introduction, Calvin established the framework of the building argument before expositing the text.

### **Extemporaneous Delivery**

When Calvin stepped into the pulpit, he did not bring with him a written manuscript or any sermon notes. If expounding the Old Testament, all he had was a Hebrew Bible, or if preaching from the New Testament, a Greek Bible. Calvin intentionally preached without notes in order to ensure a spontaneous delivery. The Reformer once said, "It appears to me that there is very little preaching of a lively kind in the Kingdom; but that the greater part deliver it by way of reading from a written discourse." Thus, Calvin believed spontaneous preaching helped yield a "lively" delivery marked by energy and passion. He was opposed to a mere mechanical reading of a preacher's sermon notes in a lifeless, monotone fashion.

However, this extemporaneous delivery is not to suggest that the Swiss Reformer was not well studied or thoroughly prepared. The fact is, Calvin was so well prepared, and had such a command of his text, that he simply did not need notes. As Calvin himself said:



**Calvin was so well prepared,  
and had such a command of  
his text, that he simply did  
not need notes.**

If I should enter the pulpit without deigning to look at a book and should frivolously think to myself, "Oh, well, when I preach, God will give me enough to say," and come here without troubling to read or think what I ought to declare, and do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people, then I should be an arrogant upstart.

Parker describes Calvin's lively delivery in the following manner:

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 of 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.

Regarding this spontaneous delivery, Hughes Oliphant Old notes that Calvin was extremely effective with this style of extemporaneous approach in the pulpit:

Calvin did not have the warm personality of Luther. One does not find in Calvin the oratorical elegance 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 effected such a tremendous reform in the lives of their congregations as did the Reformer of Geneva.

This pattern stood in direct contrast to what had been the accepted practice through the previous centuries of a bland reading of one's manuscript. Such homilies were sterile and stagnant. In contrast to this, Calvin preached with deep conviction and swelling passion.

### Exegetical Depth

When standing in the pulpit, Calvin insisted that the biblical text must be preached with a critical understanding of the passage in its original language. This method included considering the historical context and grammatical structures, thereby leading to an accurate and literal interpretation.

Calvin's exegetical skills in the original languages were extraordinary. With highest praise, Westminster theologian John Murray exclaimed, "Calvin was the exegete of

the Reformation and in the first rank of biblical exegetes of all time." Philip Schaff agrees, noting, "Calvin is the founder of the modern grammatico-historical exegesis. He affirmed . . . the sound and fundamental hermeneutical principle that the biblical authors, like all sensible writers, wished to convey to their readers one definite thought in words which they could understand." By this approach, Calvin sought to capture the true authorial intent of the passage he was preaching. The Reformer 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 his mark, or at least strays outside his 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 without due care, as though it were some game that we were playing. And yet many scholars have done this at one time.

Of first importance, Calvin believed in finding the literal sense of his text. He stated, "The true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning." This stood in stark contrast to the practice of the day, which prioritized looking for hidden meaning in the text by making every interpretation based on allegory. Instead, Calvin was constantly seeking to discover the authorial intent of the passage as it was to be understood by the original audience. Professor 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 what its meaning was for the original writer's contemporaries. This means that Calvin can neither uproot a text from its immediate literary context nor neglect the environment in which the document was originally produced. The exegete may not neglect the audience to whom the writing was originally addressed.

Puckett 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.” In other words, Calvin prioritized capturing the God-intended meaning of the biblical text. Calvin stated, “The important thing is that the Scripture should be understood and explained; how it is explained is secondary.” He believed in the importance of the substance of the message over the style of its delivery. Again, Calvin said, “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.” Simply put, he believed that the meaning of the text is, in reality, the text itself. Schaff agrees, writing:

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 speaker. 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.

Through this simple yet profound approach, Calvin attempted to put himself into the skin of the biblical authors in order to become one in thought with them. This method normally yielded the proper interpretation of the passage, and it served Calvin well for the full length of his ministry.

### **Familiar Language**

Though Calvin possessed an extraordinary mind, he nevertheless sought to preach to his listeners with a familiar language that was easy for his congregation to understand. His goal in the pulpit was to be as accessible to the common man as he would be to the learned scholar. Commenting on this popular style, Boice states, “There is little rhetorical flourish. 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.” Calvin sought clarity in his preaching, and rather than showcasing his impressive intelligence, he took great care to make sure he did not preach over the heads of his listeners.

Calvin described his simple approach in the following way, “Preachers must be like fathers, dividing bread into small pieces to feed their children.” Thus, his preaching was easily received and digested by his listeners. Parker explains, “Calvin’s towering intellect always lay concealed behind [his] deceptively simple explanations of his author’s meaning.” Parker states that Calvin’s vocabulary was “nearly always familiar and easy.” He adds, “[Calvin] 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 from similarity of sound with a quite different word.” Parker maintains:

The word that Calvin used to describe what he regarded as the most suitable style for the preacher is “familiere” [familiar]. *Familiere* might be better rendered by the word “personal,” used in the colloquial modern sense—to make the message of Scripture a personal matter, not just a collection of historical ideas; “so that we know that it is God who is speaking to us.”

In addition, Calvin used vivid expressions to communicate the truth. John Leith notes, “His sermons are replete with metaphors, comparisons, and proverbial images and wisdom that appeal to the imagination.” By these literary devices, Calvin made his message easily understood by all. Though a brilliant theologian, he remained a preacher to the common person, doing so with wide acceptance across societal lines.

### **Pastoral Tone**

As a scholar and theologian, Calvin’s preaching always remained pastoral in tone. He never lost sight of the fact that he was a shepherd feeding his flock, many of them exiles who had escaped persecution in their native land. Calvin’s sermons are full of warm persuasion and fervent appeal to trust God and follow Scripture. He spoke most often in first person plural pronouns, using “us” and “we,” including himself in the command to act upon the truth. Consider the personal exhortations he gave while expounding Micah 2:4–5:

Let us learn, therefore, not to become drunk on our foolish hopes. Rather, let us hope in God and in God’s promises, and we will never be deceived. But if we base our hopes on our own presumptuousness, God will strip everything away. This is one of our most essential doctrines, since human nature is so driven by presumptuousness. For we are so inflamed by an insupportable pride that God is forced to punish us harshly. We think we are so much higher than God that we ought to be more powerful than God. Consequently, seeing how inclined we are toward this vice, all the more then ought we pay heed to what Micah says here.

In his pastoral pleas, Calvin often called his listeners to self-examination: “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 that we are blameless?" He urged his flock to examine themselves as he applied the Scripture to their lives. Again, Calvin asserted, "This was not only written for the benefit of the Galatians, therefore, for we must apply it today and use it to teach all who cannot bear to hear the truth from others. If each of us were to examine himself carefully, we would find that we are all stained with sin until God cleanses us." By this, Calvin called them to audit their souls with the standard of the Word; this was the same standard he applied to himself.

### Loving Rebuke

Despite this pastoral encouragement, Calvin did not withhold loving rebuke from his congregation when it was needed. This admonishment was in fulfillment of Paul's charge to Timothy, that as a preacher, he must "reprove and rebuke" (2 Tim 4:2). Moreover, Paul described his own preaching ministry as "admonishing every man" (Col 1:28). This can be seen in Calvin's preaching, as the following quotation illustrates:

Now this vice reigns today far more than it ever did in Micah's time. Indeed, much more! True, many are content to have the gospel preached, provided it does not touch them, or make them uncomfortable. But the moment one stirs a stick in their dung, or uncovers their mischief, they despise such a person. If at first, then, they applauded the gospel, once they perceive that God is about to hold them accountable for their sins, behold, they forsake it all. Thus we witness today such untold murmuring against God and God's Word.

Calvin did not withhold from rebuking the Huguenot refugees who fled to France in order to come to Geneva. Some of these French exiles brought with them openly sinful lifestyles, which they refused to repent of and abandon. Calvin confronted them:

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. Some align themselves with "*gaudisseurs*" [mockers] to harden them in their

malice; others are gluttons and drunkards; others are undisciplined and quarrelsome. 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 mothers" who would find something to say against the angel of paradise.

Calvin chided these licentious French Huguenots that it would have been better if they had remained in France than flee to Geneva and sit under the preached Word, and yet remain unrepentant in their sin:

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.

Here, we learn that Calvin understood his preaching must include an element of confrontation regarding sin in the lives of his congregation, always including an exhortation to abandon that sin in repentance.

### Polemic Confrontation

For Calvin, preaching necessitated a strong defense of the faith in the face of threatening heresies. He believed that as a preacher, he must guard sound doctrine with strong words. Calvin said, "The pastor ought to have two voices: one, for gathering the sheep, and another, for warding off . . . wolves." To this end, in warding off wolves, Calvin certainly possessed a stern voice when needed. As an issue arose, he did not hesitate to use this voice for the sake of the sheep in his care.

Calvin understood that the written Word of God is a sharp two-edged sword that cuts both ways. It not only builds up believers in the faith, but also tears down that which does not conform to the standard of the Word. Calvin said, "To assert the truth is only one half of the office of teaching . . . except all the fallacies of the devil be also dissipated." He knew that his preaching must be polemic and provocative, and he openly rebuked the false teachers of his day, especially the pope, whom he believed to be the foremost false teacher in the entire world. Confronting the heretics in Rome, he declared: "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!” In so rebuking the lies of Rome, Calvin spared no words, but unleashed his strongest rebuke.

On many occasions, Calvin did not spare the pope the open condemnation he deserved:

The Pope (in order to deceive this poor world of ours, and maintain his unlawful and hellish oppression) claims to be the “Vicar of Jesus Christ,” in direct succession to the apostles! And then there are those vermin of clergy men under him, known as bishops—those horned beasts! (They only possess such an honorable title because deception abounds in Popery.) If we take them at their word, they have all descended directly from the apostles! Yet we must examine what affinity there is between them. If God has authorized their calling, then they ought to bear clear and infallible testimony to this fact. However, the Pope and all his followers are found guilty of falsifying and corrupting the whole teaching of the gospel. What they call the service of God is no more than an abomination in His sight. 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. Well then, our task is to decide whether those who claim these things have anything in common with the apostles. If they are exercising the office of good and faithful pastors, then we will listen to them! But if they are living contrary to the pattern our Lord Jesus Christ ordained for his church, what can we say? Oh, but they claim to be in true succession to the apostles! Then let them first prove it. They pretend to have evidence of this, but it is most flimsy. We might as well add that there were just as many of these “successors” in Galatia, as there were in Rome; indeed, not only there, but in several of the places where Paul had preached—in Ephesus, Colosse, Philippi, and elsewhere! So, who are the apostolic successors now? If a man believes he has the privilege of being one of Paul’s successors, he must surely go out and preach the gospel. He must produce evidence of the fact before people will accept him.

### **Evangelistic Passion**

In addition, Calvin believed in preaching the gospel to all. As he expounded the Scripture, he opened his arms wide and urged all to respond to the free offer of the gospel that he presented before them. There was no hyper-Calvinism in Calvin, none whatsoever. Calvin was strictly biblical and saw the open invitation of the gospel taught from cover to cover in the Scripture. He knew that to be a faithful expositor, he must preach the gospel in order to gather the lost in his congregation.

In his sermon on Galatians 2:15–16, Calvin concluded his exposition with an evangelistic plea. What we will read is not unusual in his preaching. In this sermon, we can feel the warmth and power of his gospel appeal as his sermon reached its climactic crescendo:

We are all under condemnation every time we compare ourselves with God. We need to have such fear, that we cannot find rest until the Lord Jesus Christ has saved us. See, therefore, how good it is for us to be heavy laden, that is to say, to hate our sins and to be in such anguish over them that we feel surrounded by the pains of death, so that we seek God in order that He might ease us of our burden. We must, however, seek Him in the knowledge that we cannot obtain salvation, full or in part, unless it is granted to us as a gift. Paul is not saying that we may find something of what we lack in Jesus Christ, and supply the rest ourselves. He says we cannot be counted righteous through our own merits, or works, but only through faith.

Having established their lost condition without Christ, Calvin then urged his listeners to respond to the offer of the free mercy of God. He urged them to give themselves to Him wholeheartedly:

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 find 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 the 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.

Such warm-hearted evangelistic pleas were characteristic of the expository preaching of this Swiss Reformer. Not only did he lead them in the worship of God, but he also urged the unconverted among them to throw themselves upon the mercy of the Almighty, calling them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

### Godward Conclusion

As Calvin concluded his sermon, he always drew his listeners back to God. He reminded them of their lowly position before their Sovereign Creator and encouraged them to live in a manner worthy of His approval. Focusing their thoughts entirely upon God, in virtually every sermon Calvin declared something similar to this:

Now let us fall before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and asking that he would make us increasingly aware of them, that we may hate them more and more, and grow in repentance (a grace that we need to exercise all our lives). May we learn so to magnify his grace, as it is shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, that we might be completely taken up with it; and may we not only do so with our lips, but place our entire trust in him. May we grow in that trust until we are gathered up into our eternal home, where we shall receive faith's reward. May he not only grant this grace to us, but to all peoples.

This final exhortation was assigned to leave his listeners *coram deo*, "in the presence of God." Calvin's desire was to leave them with God, to whom they must answer, and this final theocentric appeal was the result of the towering high view of the God of the Scriptures that Calvin possessed. The Princeton professor Benjamin B. Warfield once commented, "Here is the secret of Calvin's greatness. No man had a higher view of God than he." It was this soaring view of God that elevated Calvin's preaching, and he continually focused upon the majesty and glory of God each time as he concluded his time in the pulpit.

### Closing Reflections

Above all, Calvin insisted that all preaching be done boldly. Nothing in the Word must be withheld, but instead proclaimed from the housetops without any hesitation. The Word of God must be given full disclosure in the pulpit. If God put a truth in His Word, then it must be expounded. There can be no censuring of the written Word of God by

# The Word of God must be given full disclosure in the pulpit.

the men who stand in the pulpits of Christ's church. The full counsel of God must be declared every time the church gathers. In a sermon on Deuteronomy, Calvin said:

Let the pastors boldly dare all things *by the word of God*, of which they are constituted administrators. Let them constrain all the power, glory, and excellence of the world to give place to and to obey the divine majesty of this word. Let them enjoin everyone by it, from the highest to the lowest. Let them edify the body of Christ. Let them devastate Satan's reign. Let them pasture the sheep, kill the wolves, instruct and exhort the rebellious. Let them bind and loose, thunder and lightning, if necessary, *but let them do all according to the word of God*.

John Calvin stands as a timeless example to all generations of the power of the Word of God preached. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was birthed in the flames of this fervent expository preaching, and if we are to see another Reformation in our day, it will come in exactly the same manner as it came in five hundred years ago. It will be by this primary, ordinary means of grace that we will see another history altering movement as what came half a millennium ago.

In these days, may you and I redouble our commitment to preach the Word of God with precision and power. May we remain steadfast in this endeavor to exposit the unsearchable riches of the inspired text of Scripture. Let us be confident that God will honor the man who honors His Word, and as God's Word promises us, the Word will do the work God has purposed it to do, according to His sovereign will. ♦





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THE CALVIN PROJECT:  
*the* CALVIN WE  
TEND TO FORGET

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SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

Most readers of these pages will be familiar not only with the name but also with the ministry of John Calvin. But “the Calvin we tend to forget”? What new revelations about the Genevan Reformer are we about to discover? Many of us handle his commentaries on an almost weekly basis. Forget Calvin? Not subscribers to *The Expositor*, surely?

Perhaps not. But he has been forgotten before. As is well known, at one time there was such disinterest in his life and work that—alas—many of the manuscripts of his sermons, carefully taken down and collated by a team of diligent amanuenses, were sold *for the paper to be recycled*. No matter how much Calvin you have collected—even if you owned the set of *Ioannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia*, a mere fifty-nine massive tomes, plus additions—you still would not have Calvin’s complete works!

Despite this prodigious body of material to be found in so many university libraries, in the academic world, Calvin the great theologian and Reformer was all but forgotten a century or so ago. Were it not for the influence of Karl Barth’s rediscovery of him, the five hundredth anniversary of his birth might have aroused little interest in the academy. Calvin was yesterday’s man.

The same was true in the church. Were it not for an unexpected and unpredicted movement of the Spirit throughout the world in the last half century or so, which led to the rediscovery and republication of the works of the sixteenth-century Reformers and the seventeenth-century Puritans, few preachers today would ever read a word written by John Calvin. Indeed, when I was a student in Scotland, celebrating my twenty-first birthday with money my mother had given to me, I had to *import* a set of Calvin’s commentaries from the U.S. They cost the equivalent of a week and a half of the average national wage. I knew no contemporaries who possessed a set, and few who wanted to. In sharp contrast, Calvin’s writings are currently in abundant supply; a set of his commentaries can be had for the monetary equivalent of a few hours’ work.

How, then, could we “forget” Calvin? We look back to him as a standard model of systematic expository preaching. Like him, many of us are resolutely committed to preaching consecutively through books of Scripture. We feel we are following in the path he blazed. But are we? Certainly, we have seen a remarkable restoration of systematic expository preaching.



#### SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

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What was rare fifty years ago is now commonplace, and indeed, is sometimes seen as the only proper way to preach—verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book—just like Calvin did.

We know he was neither alone nor original. Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) had recovered the pattern he saw in Augustine and Chrysostom in the early church. He had launched his career as People’s Preacher at the Old Minster in Zurich in 1519 by the stunningly novel practice of preaching systematically through the New Testament, beginning with Matthew. Others followed. But none of his contemporaries rivaled Calvin in exegetical ability. He was a superbly gifted and highly trained literary exegete, and he brought those God-given gifts to bear on the task of gospel ministry. His rare autobiographical comments in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Psalms* give us a clear hint that his insight into the meaning of Scripture was already evident within the first year after the “sudden [or perhaps unexpected] conversion” by which God subdued him. And later in life, he was without peer in his sheer dogged persistence in expounding and applying the text of Scripture over many years. The effect on Geneva and far beyond (especially France) was staggering—although the story of Calvin’s ministry, and the Minutes of the Consistory of Geneva, make clear that by no means were all enthusiastic about his sermons.

But despite these gifts, Calvin had what would today be regarded as an excruciatingly difficult, perhaps even disastrous first pastorate. Humanly speaking, he was little prepared for the rough and tumble of pastoral ministry. He was, after all, a scholar, and still in his mid-twenties.

If it is still true that the average first pastorate in the U.S. lasts about two years, Calvin was, at first, a quintessentially average pastor. Within that period—accompanied by William Farel and other colleagues—he upset large and influential sections of the Genevan citizenry. A crisis point was reached on Easter weekend of 1538, and within a matter of days, Calvin was forced out of town. Famously, some three and a half years later, he was invited back. He saw his return as a fate worse than death. But he came, older, more mature, wiser, and—in addition—having already taken the first steps in initiating what we might call “The Calvin Project.”

What was “The Calvin Project”? The idea was certainly his even if the description is ours. In essence, it was his answer to the question, “What should a genuinely biblical ministry look like in sixteenth-century Switzerland?”

We are all familiar with Calvin’s answer. Expository preaching was its heart and backbone. However much he might have preferred the life of secluded scholarship, Calvin had now become, for better or worse, a gospel preacher first and foremost.

The season Calvin spent in Strasbourg under the wise and watchful eye of Martin Bucer had matured him. It had also enlarged his view of what his ministry should be, and “The Calvin Project” was soon underway. “The Project” was comprised of a series of elements:

### 1. The Pen

While pastoring his own congregation, Calvin conceived an ambitious program for the benefit of the church. He would explain, expound, and apply the Scriptures in writing. He planned to write his way through the books of the New Testament (just as later he would lecture through much of the Old Testament). Despite the busyness of life and the pressures of his position, within a period of about twenty-five years he had commented on almost the whole of the New Testament. He did so out of the conviction that literate Christians needed to study Scripture for themselves, and his goal was to help them to do so.

Calvin did not set out to write technical critical commentaries of the modern genre, but ones that were marked by clarity and brevity and suffused with a genuine reverence for the details of the text, treating them as God’s own words. The measure of his success here can be seen in this: a few preachers today might consult Luther on a passage—but largely to be gripped and inspired by his purple prose. Many, however, turn to Calvin for the clear exposition and application of the text. Had he done this alone, his contribution would have been immense.

“The Project” envisaged a fraternal relationship be-

tween the *Commentaries* and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. They were the two parts of a unified whole. And so *The Institutes*, which had been first published in 1536 as a six-chapter primer on the Reformed faith, was now progressively reworked to become a handbook of evangelical theology, expounding Christian doctrine at length and in a biblical way. The *Commentaries* then exegeted the biblical text and, when necessary, redirected readers to the *Institutes* for the elucidation of points of doctrine. The combination of biblical exegesis and exposition with a coherent and warm-hearted exposition of a biblically informed theology thus became the supporting pillar for the rest of his work.

It is surprisingly easy to miss the point here. Calvin not only spoke the Word; he wrote the Word. He viewed writing as an integral part of his ministry.

Calvin was called to be a preacher *and* to be an author. Not all preachers are called to be *authors*. The spoken word and the written word are two very different modes of communication, even although both employ words. But most preachers will be *writers*. The existence of new social media has paradoxically created a whole new generation of writers. But there can be writing on social media by Christians, and by pastors, unfortunately, that is simply self-obsessed, and indeed self-promoting. The medium can become a means not of ministry, but of self-expression. But given the widespread use of communication technology, these media can also be wonderful tools to communicate the Word of God to our people—a mechanism by which we do for our own people what Calvin was doing for his. This requires that we first see writing as an aspect of our ministry of the Word, and that we do it under Paul’s rubric: “for we do not proclaim ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5). Who would have thought that in a world of blogs and tweets and Facebook and the like, remembering Calvin’s vision for his writing would transform what we write into a ministry of the Word?

That said, the spoken ministry clearly lay at the heart of Calvin’s vision. In fact, it did so on a virtually daily basis from the day he returned to Geneva.

### 2. The Pulpit

The atmosphere in St. Peter’s Church must have been electric in the fall of 1541 as the congregation crowded into the dark sanctuary to watch Calvin once again mount the pulpit steps. Three years ago they had exiled him. What would he say? What text would he use to excoriate them? What happened is well known. No doubt the memory of Calvin’s last sermon, perhaps of his last sentences, had lingered long

# If we really want to be Calvin's heirs and to see similar fruit, then we do well to explore how we can implement this aspect of "The Calvin Project" today . . .

in the hearts and minds of these Genevans. They surely steeled themselves for a loud trumpet blast against their sins. Calvin turned the pages in his Bible until he found the place—and began to expound the passage he had been preaching on in the series that had ended so abruptly three years and more before. From that hour he continued, day after day, week after week, for more than two decades, in the consecutive exposition of Scripture—verse after verse, chapter after chapter, book after book after book.

What, however, we are liable to forget is that when Calvin had finished his sermon, the next time he preached was not a whole week but only a day later. For, although his schedule was adjusted at various times to make it workable for a man plagued with a catalogue of medical problems, Calvin preached on a daily, not a weekly basis. Eventually, the rotation that he found workable was, in addition to preaching at least twice every Sunday, preaching also on every weekday during every second week. In other words, his preaching pattern was not merely *consecutive* exposition in terms of biblical passages, but in chronological terms too. It was daily exposition (whether by himself or by one of the other ministers). On average, then, Calvin preached six or seven sermons each week.

To many contemporary preachers, this statistic is staggering. Only a genius could do this. By definition we see it as an idiosyncratic happenstance.

To think this way, however, is to misunderstand the goal of "The Project" Calvin had conceived. His vision was to pour the Word into the minds, affections, and souls of the Genevans, not merely to give them a biblical education. He had in view the transformation of their whole lives by the renewal of their minds through the ministry of the Word. Unlike so much contemporary evangelicalism, he placed

great weight on the work the Word itself accomplished, not just on what we must accomplish in response to it. If the most important thing about preaching is what we do as a result of it, then a moderate-length sermon once a week is all most of us can handle. But if, as our Lord prayed, we are to be sanctified through the truth, then the more of that truth that is preached to us the better. If we really want to be Calvin's heirs and to see similar fruit, then we do well to explore how we can implement this aspect of "The Calvin Project" today, not now in Geneva, Switzerland (unless we live there!), but in Smallsville, U.S.A., or wherever the Lord has placed us.

Calvin's question was: "What does genuinely apostolic ministry look like in this place (Geneva) and at this time (1541–1564)?" The guidelines he found in the New Testament included that it would produce a devotion to the apostles' teaching that involved very frequently gathering for their preaching. Not only does Luke say (i) "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42) but (ii) that in order to do so they gathered "day by day" (Acts 2:46, 47).

In a very different context, the "last of the apostles" applied this same pattern, now in Ephesus rather than Jerusalem. Paul hired the lecture hall of Tyrannus. There he could be found "reasoning daily" with the disciples, continuing to do so "for two years" (Acts 19:9–10). Our modern translations often include a footnote at this point. It comes from the so-called "Western" textual tradition of Acts 19:9 and is sufficiently well attested to be at least reckoned an accurate hypothesis. Paul taught the Word daily "from the fifth hour to the tenth," or in our terms, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.—the period when the sun was at its zenith and every self-respecting student in Tyrannus' philosophy

class was having a siesta in the shade. That amounts to five hours each day!

What Calvin was doing, therefore, was not underwritten by the conviction that he had unique skills and could sustain the workload or was a good enough preacher to be able to sustain the attendance. No, his vision was to immerse his people in Scripture until its teaching cleansed and transformed them into men and women in whom a biblical understanding and lifestyle was, as it were, instinctive to them—as if it were second nature. Not merely informed minds, but transformed lives that issue from the renewing of the mind was the goal in view.


Compare this to current patterns of ministry. Should it not make us ask whether the comparative impoverishment of Christian character, the low levels of biblical understanding, and the all-too-superficial impact made on society by the evangelical church are virtually inevitable given the comparative famine of the hearing of the Word of God that many churches endure? How can we hope to live a genuinely cutting-edge Christian life if we are on a subsistence diet? Our churches' leaderships need to look very closely at this issue and engage in the self-examination required to develop better patterns of church life. It is insufficient to say, "We live neither in sixteenth-century Geneva, nor even in Smallville, U.S.A., and therefore this kind of vision is impractical to the point of impossibility." Rather, we need to ask serious questions about our vision and our desire for spiritual growth and find creative answers. And perhaps ultimately we need to be asking questions about the shape, size, and even location of the church we attend to make greater exposure to the Word possible.

All this, of course, assumes—with Calvin—that the public and corporate ministry of the Word is foundational and fundamental, and not a merely individual matter. Granted this, how can we make it possible for our people to have a diet of the Word that is more than approximately fifteen percent of the intake a believer in Geneva might have had? At the very least, it calls for more than one gathering on the Lord's Day and opportunity during the week for the exposition of Scripture.

Perhaps it is worth noting in passing that here is a difference between preaching consecutively through Bible books *day by day* and *week by week*. Seventy-eight sermons

on Philippians, for example, is the work of a year and a half in contemporary church life. In Geneva, it was the work of about three months. There is an important psychological difference between the two experiences. Calvin could work his way through any book of Scripture in a fifth of the time we could, while still preaching the same number of sermons. We need to be careful lest following Calvin slavishly lead to lethargy in the congregation (not all of us have the gifts to sustain a series on a short book for eighteen months!). Doing so may also mean that, unless we genuinely have developed a "Calvin-Like Project" in our ministry, many months and even years may pass without us handling all kinds of important doctrines, emphases, and issues.

It is precisely here that the other dimensions of "The



## Calvin understood that preaching the Word is not the whole ministry of the Word.

Calvin Project" become relevant. Calvin understood that preaching the Word is not the whole of the ministry of the Word.

How, then, did he further develop "The Project"? In several ways. The first of these was catechetical teaching.

### 3. The Catechism

Calvin held the view that a catechism was of such importance that the church could not survive without it. For this reason, every Sunday there was a catechetical service for youngsters—to which, on occasion, the Consistory would also send adults lacking in their understanding of the basics of the Christian faith. Calvin himself wrote a catechism for children. Granted some of the questions are quite long—doctrinal statements with a question tagged on—but Calvin was not so obtuse that he did not provide simple answers—such as (my own favorite): "It is as you say!"

But why did he see this as so vital?

There are considerable intellectual benefits from learning a catechism. For one thing, it teaches us to think clearly and logically. It also teaches us that Scripture truth discloses itself

to us only when right and appropriate questions are asked and we listen to what it actually says (a principle that in the Reformation context men of learning would apply with great effect in the scientific enterprise). But more than this it provides the believer's mind with categories of thought that make it possible for us to grasp and retain the content of the exposition of Scripture we are hearing. This, in turn, enables us to speak the gospel coherently, to see through the wisdom of the world so that we are not easily deceived children, and it saves us from being so doctrine-light that we are blown to and fro by every new wind of teaching in town. In addition, we learn to think great thoughts of God and so to grasp the wonder of all that He is and has done for us and given to us.

The result? Children or adults who know the catechism are equipped to think biblically and clearly about God, themselves, the gospel, and the lifestyle to which we are called in Christ, and to speak coherently and persuasively to those who are not yet believers, so much so that a young teenager in Calvin's Geneva who had diligently attended the catechism service on Sunday afternoon knew and could articulate far more Christian doctrine than the vast majority of members of evangelical churches today.

I recall being told of an incident at a youth retreat in one of the congregations I served. Two mothers were helping the youth staff, and during some of the "down time," the youngsters were sitting around asking all kinds of theological questions. One of the mothers patiently provided lucid answer after lucid answer to them, with what seemed to the other to be a remarkable display of biblical knowledge and wisdom. Later, when they were talking privately, the second mother commented on this. "How do you know all that?" she asked; "Your answers were amazingly clear and helpful!" "Oh" said the other mother, almost casually, "it's all in *The Shorter Catechism*." We may smile; but Calvin knew exactly what he was doing.

Catechizing carries a bad odor in many churches today. We have had the wool pulled over our eyes by educationists and psychologists who tell us children neither want to know nor are able to understand Christian doctrine. Have they never listened to the questions young people actually ask? Or do they refused to listen to them because they were embarrassed they do not know the answer? We need to learn from "The Calvin Project" how important and wonderfully healthy it is to grow in the knowledge and understanding of God. And we need to find ways of re-introducing catechism—whether by returning to the old ones or employing some of the new and usually simpler ones, or by finding other ways of teaching the children in the church—and their parents—the riches of the gospel.

One illustration of such a re-introduction could be seen in Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, when James Montgomery Boice was minister. His express vision ran counter to what he perceived happening in American evangelicalism. "While many churches are encouraging adults to behave like youngsters in worship; here we want to see our children growing to be adults in worship." And this was many years before the publication of Thomas Berger's 2012 study *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*.

Most guest preachers would easily recall one of the ways this vision was developed. The preacher would go to the children's Sunday School class and point out one or two things for them to listen out for in the sermon. Then, during a period of varied activities, each child would at some point leave his or her place and go to a wonderful and warm-hearted elder sitting on his own at the back of the room. There they would repeat the catechism question and answer for the week before returning to their place. The elder had been carefully chosen—a man universally respected, well-proven, trusted in every respect, and loved—a man with a big heart and a welcoming smile. It was obvious how much the children looked forward to their few minutes with him. And so they discovered the pleasures of learning and confessing. At the same time they learned how much their elders cared for them as well as for their parents.

Young boys grow into young men. "The Calvin Project" also encompassed them. Here we meet Calvin the professor of Old Testament.

#### 4. The Lectern

The word "professor" suggests to us the ivory towers of the university or seminary. And it is true that Calvin served as a Bible professor specializing in the Old Testament. He gave three lectures each week—so appreciated that sometimes, in order to accommodate the numbers, they were held in the church sanctuary rather than in the lecture room. Many of those lectures remain in print, wonderfully concluding with his customary prayer at the end of the class.

This may be of interest to us as preachers—it certainly makes Calvin seem all the more impressive. But what relevance does it have to *our* ministry? Most of us do not possess the kind of gifts that seminary professors are expected to have. But we would be mistaken to conclude this. For what Calvin was essentially doing was preparing younger men for gospel ministry, investing his gifts in them out of a burden to send preachers of the gospel throughout Europe and beyond, but especially to the France in which he himself had

become a *persona non grata*. The astonishing fact is that he prepared hundreds of such young men to become “church planters.” Some of them would be martyred. His vision was that serious.

Simply put, then, the real Calvin was a man with a missionary zeal and a burden to invest all he could in the ministers of the future. They came to Geneva in droves, largely to sit under his teaching and to be near enough to feel the vibrations of ministry. They lived with members of the church and attended the various worship services. And with this combination of influences, they became some of the best fruit of “The Calvin Project.”

What might we so easily forget about Calvin in this context? Perhaps we never expected that he would be like Moses, surrounded by Joshuas, or like Elijah, surrounded by Elishas, or like Paul, surrounded by Timothys. But he was. And we should be too.

There was yet more, however. Even many who know about Calvin’s ministry forget about *Les Congrégations*—

## 5. The Congregations

But what were “The Congregations”? Each Friday pastors and others from Geneva and its environs met together for the study of Scripture and for mutual exhortation. It was a pattern that the Puritans would later follow in a less structured fashion by gathering in the market town on market day for preaching and then “combining” (taking a meal together and discussing not only the message preached but other matters). They would bring younger men with them to benefit from the ministry of the more seasoned ministers.

In Geneva, the pastors studied the Scriptures together. It is not difficult to imagine what frequently happened. Whenever he was present, Calvin was looked to for a sure-footed understanding of the passage under consideration—and would therefore add a further impromptu exposition to those he was giving in public. These occasions must have felt like being in the workshop of the master exegete. Not only did they serve as continuing education opportunities (fifty-two times a year!), but they provided occasions when it was possible to observe at close quarters a model of handling Scripture accurately and pastorally.

This was *not* the typical pastors’ fraternal where papers on topics of interest are read and coffee is drunk. For one thing, the mutual exhortation was much more serious; it was an occasion of mutual ministry. Men heard each other handle Scripture on a regular basis, learned from one another, and helped each other.

There is surely a pattern here that needs to be recovered. It long persisted in the communion season of past generations.

Granted (in my own view) the Lord’s Supper was celebrated far too infrequently (perhaps only twice a year), the pattern had two merits. The first was that the “season” lasted for perhaps five days. People arranged their lives so that they could be under the ministry of the Word, and in fellowship corporately and privately in a more intensive way than normal, for an extended period of time. Friends from elsewhere gathered. Frequently, great blessing was enjoyed by the congregation.

In addition to these blessings for the people, however, given the number of preaching occasions during the “season,” the local pastor would invite two or three friends to share the ministry of the Word. In this way, brethren heard one another preach, spent time together in talking about the ministry they were receiving, and had the opportunity for mutual exhortation and encouragement. More was accomplished, therefore, than in our contemporary annual church conferences where we invite as well-known a preacher as we can (even if we do not know him!) to preach through a weekend. It is a pattern worth recovering—and around a communion season would be an ideal time to recover it. Apart from other benefits that might be listed, a congregation then gets to know their pastor in the context of other pastors who also know him well.

“The Calvin Project” was centered on the ongoing preaching of the Word, immersing the people in the truth of the gospel. It was further strengthened by the written word—*Commentaries*, *Institutes*, and other materials. Future ministry was carefully instructed and trained in an educational setting in which the students were intimately related to the life of the local church, and the present ministry was strengthened and challenged by the weekly congregations. It was a simple yet wonderfully effective plan.

But one further element was essential—prayer.

## 6. The Prayers

When he returned to Geneva in 1541, Calvin was able to see implemented a practice he saw as key to the whole project. Every Wednesday in Geneva was designated the Day of Prayer, and specific gatherings for prayer were held. Calvin realized that apostolic ministry cannot be revived without the basic apostolic pattern: “We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

Would it perhaps be this element of “The Calvin Project” that would meet with least enthusiastic response today? We are keen to learn—preaching, lectures, teaching, fraternal, conferences—these we can organize; but not prayer. Herein perhaps lies the greatest challenge for the leadership in our churches. Calvin knew that, but he was not daunted by it.



Occasionally, one encounters a church and/or a pastor that conveys the impression they “do things right” and are “really reformed” and “follow Calvin.” Perhaps. But it is doubtful that we can claim to be following Calvin without seeking ways to do all that Calvin did. Sadly, such congregations sometimes mean no more than that they celebrate the Lord’s Supper on a weekly basis (something Calvin desired but never attained). But there is so much more to “The Calvin Project” than that—preaching, communicating in writing, committing ourselves to the future preachers of the gospel, engaging with other preachers and sitting under each other’s ministries—and much prayer.

Calvin was by no means perfect, nor did he perfectly accomplish his project. But he surely responded to the exhortation of the apostle Paul: “Brethren, join in following my example”—and the words that follow surely encourage us to follow in his footsteps: “Observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us” (Phil 3:17).

It is easy to forget some things about Calvin and his ministry. There was a good deal more to “The Calvin Project” than we may have thought. There is still much to learn from him. ♦



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JOHN CALVIN  
*on* PIETY

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JOEL R. BEEKE

John Calvin's *Institutes* have earned him the title of "the preeminent systematist of the Protestant Reformation." His reputation as an intellectual, however, is often evaluated in isolation from the vital spiritual and pastoral context in which he wrote his theology. Yet, for Calvin, theological understanding and practical piety, truth and usefulness, are inseparable. Theology first of all deals with knowledge—knowledge of God and of ourselves—but there is no true knowledge where there is no true piety.

Calvin's concept of piety (*pietas*) is rooted in the knowledge of God and includes attitudes and actions that are directed to the adoration and service of God. In addition, his *pietas* includes a host of related themes, such as filial piety in human relationships and respect and love for the image of God in human beings. Piety as described by Calvin is evident in people who recognize through experiential faith that they have been accepted in Christ and engrafted into His body by the grace of God. In this "mystical union," the Lord claims them as His own in life and in death. They become God's people and members of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This relationship restores their joy of fellowship with God; it recreates their lives.

Below, I will demonstrate that Calvin's approach to piety is fundamentally biblical, with an emphasis on the heart more than the mind. Head and heart must work together, but the heart is more important. After an introductory look at the definition and goal of piety in Calvin's thinking, I will show how his *pietas* affects the theological, ecclesiological, and practical dimensions of his thought.

### The Definition and Importance of Piety

*Pietas* is one of the major themes of Calvin's theology. His theology is, as John T. McNeill says, "his piety described at length." He was determined to confine theology within the limits of piety. In his preface addressed to King Francis I, Calvin says that the purpose of writing the *Institutes* was "solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness [*pietas*]."

For Calvin, *pietas* designates the right attitude of man toward God. It is an attitude that includes true knowledge, heartfelt worship, saving faith, filial fear, prayerful submission, and reverential love. Knowing who and what God is (theology) involves embracing right attitudes toward Him and doing what He wants (piety). In his first catechism, Calvin writes, "True piety consists in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and



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reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death." In the *Institutes*, Calvin is more succinct: "I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces." This love and reverence for God is a necessary concomitant to any knowledge of Him and embraces all of life. As Calvin says, "The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness." Or, as the subtitle of the first edition of the *Institutes* states, "Embracing almost the whole sum of piety & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety."

Calvin's commentaries also reflect the importance of *pietas*. For example, he writes on 1 Timothy 4:7–8: "You will do the thing of greatest value, if with all your zeal and ability you devote yourself to godliness [*pietas*] alone. Godliness is the beginning, middle, and end of Christian living. Where it is complete, there is nothing lacking . . . Thus the conclusion is that we should concentrate exclusively on godliness, for when once we have attained to it, God requires no more of us." Commenting on 2 Peter 1:3, he says, "As soon as [Peter] has made mention of life he immediately adds godliness [*pietas*] as if it were the soul of life."

### Piety's Supreme Goal: *Soli Deo Gloria*

The goal of piety, as well as the entire Christian life, is the glory of God—glory that shines in God's attributes, in the structure of the world, and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Glorifying God supersedes personal salvation for every truly pious person. So Calvin writes to Cardinal Sadoleto:

It is not very sound theology to confine a man's thought so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive for his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God.... I am persuaded that there is no man imbued with true piety who will not consider as insipid that long and labored exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God.

The goal of piety—that God may be glorified in us—is that for which we were created. It thus becomes the goal of the regenerate who yearn to live out the purpose of their original creation. The pious man, according to Calvin, confesses, “We are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.”

God redeems, adopts, and sanctifies His people that His glory might shine in them and deliver them from impious self-seeking. The pious man’s deepest concern therefore is God Himself and the things of God—God’s Word, God’s authority, God’s gospel, God’s truth. He yearns to know more of God and to commune more with Him.

But how do we glorify God? As Calvin writes, “God has prescribed for us a way in which he will be glorified by us, namely, piety, which consists in the obedience of his Word. He that exceeds these bounds does not go about to honor God, but rather to dishonor him.” Obedience to God’s Word means taking refuge in Christ for our forgiveness of sins, knowing Him through His Word, serving Him with a loving heart, doing good works in gratitude for His goodness, and exercising self-denial to the point of loving our enemies. This response involves total surrender to God Himself, His Word, and His will.

Calvin says, “I offer thee my heart, Lord, promptly and sincerely.” That is the desire of all who are truly pious. However, that desire can only be realized through communion with Christ and participation in Him, for outside of Christ even the most religious person lives for himself. Only in Christ can the pious live as willing servants of their Lord,

The goal of piety—that God may be glorified in us—is that for which we were created. It thus becomes the goal of the regenerate who yearn to live out the purpose of their original creation.

faithful soldiers of their Commander, and obedient children of their Father.

#### **Piety’s Profound Root: Mystical Union**

“Calvin’s doctrine of union with Christ is one of the most consistently influential features of his theology and ethics, if not the single most important teaching that animates the whole of his thought and his personal life,” writes David Willis-Watkins.

Calvin did not intend to present theology from the viewpoint of a single doctrine. Nonetheless, his sermons, commentaries, and theological works are so permeated with the union-with-Christ doctrine that it becomes a primary focal point in his descriptions of Christian faith and practice. Calvin says as much when he writes, “That joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.”

For Calvin, piety is rooted in the believer’s mystical union (*unio mystica*) with Christ. That union is possible because Christ took on our human nature, filling it with His virtue. Union with Christ in His humanity is historical, ethical, and personal, but not essential. There is no crass mixture (*crassa mixtura*) of human substances between Christ and

us. Nonetheless, Calvin states, “Not only does he cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us.” This union is one of the gospel’s greatest mysteries. Because of the fountain of Christ’s perfection in our nature, the pious may, by faith, draw whatever they need for their sanctification. The flesh of Christ is the source from which His people derive life and power.

If Christ had died and risen but was not applying His salvation to believers for their regeneration and sanctification, His work would have been ineffectual. Piety shows that the Spirit of Christ is working in us what has already been accomplished in Christ. Christ administers His sanctification to the church through His royal priesthood so that the church may live piously for Him.

### **Piety’s Major Theme: Communion and Participation**

The heartbeat of Calvin’s practical theology and piety is communion (*communio*) with Christ. This involves participation (*participatio*) in His benefits, which are inseparable from union with Christ. That emphasis was already evident in the *Confessio Fidei de Eucharistia* (1537) signed by Calvin, Martin Bucer, and Wolfgang Capito. However, Calvin’s communion with Christ is not shaped by his doctrine of the Lord’s Supper; rather, his emphasis on spiritual communion with Christ helped shape his concept of the sacrament.

Similarly, the concepts of *communio* and *participatio* helped shape Calvin’s understanding of regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, assurance, election, and the church, for he could not speak of any doctrine apart from communion with Christ. That is the heart of Calvin’s system of theology.

### **Piety’s Double Bond: The Spirit and Faith**

Communion with Christ is realized only through Spirit-worked faith, Calvin teaches. It is actual communion, not because believers participate in the essence of Christ’s nature, but because the Spirit of Christ unites believers so intimately to Christ that they become flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. From God’s perspective, the Spirit is the bond between Christ and believers, whereas from our perspective, faith is the bond. These perspectives do not clash with each other, since one of the Spirit’s principal operations is to work faith in a sinner.

Only the Spirit can unite Christ in heaven with the believer on earth. Just as in the Incarnation, the Spirit united heaven and earth, so in regeneration the Spirit raises the elect from earth to commune with Christ in heaven and

brings Christ into the hearts and lives of the elect on earth. Communion with Christ is always the result of the Spirit’s work—a work that is astonishing and experiential rather than comprehensible. The Holy Spirit is thus the link that binds the believer to Christ and the channel through which Christ is communicated to the believer. As Calvin writes to Peter Martyr:

We grow up together with Christ into one body, and he shares his Spirit with us, through whose hidden operation he has become ours. Believers receive this communion with Christ at the same time as their calling. But they grow from day to day more and more in this communion, in proportion to the life of Christ growing within them.

Calvin moves beyond Luther in this emphasis on communion with Christ. Calvin stresses that, by His Spirit, Christ empowers those who are united with Him by faith. Being “engrafted into the death of Christ, we derive from it a secret energy, as the twig does from the root,” Calvin writes. The believer “is animated by the secret power of Christ; so that Christ may be said to live and grow in him; for as the soul enlivens the body, so Christ imparts life to his members.”

Like Luther, Calvin believes that knowledge is fundamental to faith. Such knowledge includes the Word of God as well as the proclamation of the gospel. Since the written Word is exemplified in the living Word, Jesus Christ, in whom all God’s promises are fulfilled, faith cannot be separated from Christ. The work of the Spirit does not supplement or supersede the revelation of Scripture, but authenticates it, Calvin teaches. “Take away the Word, and no faith will remain,” Calvin says.

Faith unites the believer to Christ by means of the Word, enabling the believer to receive Christ as He is clothed in the gospel and graciously offered by the Father. By faith, God also dwells in the believer. Consequently, Calvin says, “We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him,” but participate in Christ by faith, for this “revives us from death to make us a new creature.”

By faith, the believer possesses Christ and grows in Him. What’s more, the degree of his faith exercised through the Word determines his degree of communion with Christ. “Everything which faith should contemplate is exhibited to us in Christ,” Calvin writes. Though Christ remains in heaven, the believer who excels in piety learns to grasp Christ so firmly by faith that Christ dwells within his heart. By faith, the pious live by what they find in Christ rather than by what they find in themselves.

For Calvin, communion with Christ flows out of union with Christ. Looking to Christ for assurance, therefore, means looking at ourselves in Christ. As David Willis-Watkins writes, “Assurance of salvation is a derivative self-knowledge, whose focus remains on Christ as united to his body, the Church, of which we are members.”

### **Piety’s Double Cleansing: Justification and Sanctification**

According to Calvin, believers receive from Christ by faith the “double grace” of justification and sanctification, which, together, provide a twofold cleansing. Justification offers imputed purity, and sanctification, actual purity.

Calvin defines justification as “the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men.” He goes on to say that “since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ.” Justification includes the remission of sins and the right to eternal life.

Calvin regards justification as a central doctrine of the Christian faith. He calls it “the principal hinge by which religion is supported,” the soil out of which the Christian life develops, and the substance of piety. Justification not only serves God’s honor by satisfying the conditions for salvation; it also offers the believer’s conscience “peaceful rest and serene tranquility.” As Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the heart and soul of piety. Believers need not worry about their status with God because they are justified by faith. They can willingly renounce personal glory and daily accept their own life from the hand of their Creator and Redeemer. Daily skirmishes may be lost to the enemy, but Jesus Christ has won the war for them.

Sanctification refers to the process in which the believer increasingly becomes conformed to Christ in heart, conduct, and devotion to God. It is the continual remaking of the believer by the Holy Spirit, the increasing consecration of body and soul to God. In sanctification, the believer offers himself to God as a sacrifice. This does not come without great struggle and slow progress. It requires cleansing the pollution of the flesh and renouncing the world. It requires repentance, mortification, and daily conversion.

Justification and sanctification are inseparable, Calvin says. To separate one from the other is to tear Christ in pieces, or like trying to separate the sun’s light from the heat that light generates. Believers are justified for the purpose of living piously in order to worship God in holiness of life.

### **Piety through the Church**

Calvin’s *pietas* doesn’t stand apart from Scripture or from the church. Rather, it is rooted in the Word and nurtured in the church. While breaking with the clericalism and absolutism of Rome, Calvin nonetheless maintains a high view of the church. “If we do not prefer the church to all other objects of our interest, we are unworthy of being counted among her members,” he writes.

Augustine once said, “He cannot have God for his Father who refuses to have the church for his mother.” To that Calvin adds, “For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels.” Apart from the church, there is little hope for forgiveness of sins or salvation, Calvin wrote. It is always disastrous to leave the church.

For Calvin, believers are engrafted into Christ and His church, for spiritual growth happens within the church. The church is mother, educator, and nourisher of every believer, for the Holy Spirit acts in her. Believers cultivate piety by the Spirit through the church’s teaching ministry, progressing from spiritual infancy to adolescence to full manhood in Christ. They do not graduate from the church until they die. This lifelong education is offered within an atmosphere of genuine piety in which believers love and care for one another under the headship of Christ. It encourages the growth of one another’s gifts and love, as it is “constrained to borrow from others.”

Growth in piety is impossible apart from the church, for piety is fostered by the communion of saints. Within the church, believers “cleave to each other in the mutual distribution of gifts.” Each member has his own place and gifts to use within the body. Ideally, the entire body uses these gifts in symmetry and proportion, ever reforming and growing toward perfection.

### **Piety of the Word**

The Word of God is central to the development of Christian piety in the believer. Calvin’s relational model explains how.

True religion is a dialogue between God and man. The part of the dialogue that God initiates is revelation. In this, God comes down to meet us, addresses us, and makes Himself known to us in the preaching of the Word. The other part of the dialogue is man’s response to God’s revelation. This response, which includes trust, adoration, and godly fear, is what Calvin calls *pietas*.

The preaching of the Word saves us and preserves us as the Spirit enables us to appropriate the blood of Christ and

respond to Him with reverential love. By the Spirit-empowered preaching of men, “the renewal of the saints is accomplished and the body of Christ is edified,” Calvin says.

The preaching of the Word is our spiritual food and our medicine for spiritual health, Calvin says. With the Spirit’s blessing, ministers are spiritual physicians who apply the Word to our souls as earthly physicians apply medicine to our bodies. With the Word, these spiritual doctors diagnose, prescribe for, and cure spiritual disease in those plagued by sin and death. The preached Word is used as an instrument to heal, cleanse, and make fruitful our disease-prone souls.

The Spirit, or the “internal minister,” promotes piety by using the “external minister” to preach the Word. As Calvin says, the external minister “holds forth the vocal word and it is received by the ears,” but the internal minister “truly communicates the thing proclaimed . . . that is Christ.”

To promote piety, the Spirit not only uses the gospel to work faith deep within the souls of His elect, as we have already seen, but He also uses the law. The law promotes piety in three ways:

1. It restrains sin and promotes righteousness in the church and society, preventing both from lapsing into chaos.


2. It disciplines, educates, convicts, and drives us outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ, the fulfiller and end of the law. The law cannot lead us to a saving knowledge of God in Christ. Rather, the Holy Spirit uses the law as a mirror to show us our guilt, to shut us off from hope, and to bring us to repentance. It drives us to the spiritual need out of which faith in Christ is born. This convicting use of the law is critical for the believer’s piety, for it prevents the ungodly self-righteousness that is prone to reassert itself even in the holiest of saints.

3. It becomes the rule of life for the believer. “What is the rule of life which [God] has given us?” Calvin asks in the Genevan Catechism. The answer: “His law.” Later, Calvin says the law “shows the mark at which we ought to aim, the goal towards which we ought to press, that each of us, according to the measure of grace bestowed upon him, may endeavor to frame his life according to the highest rectitude, and, by constant study, continually advance more and more.

Calvin writes about the third use of the law in the first edition of his *Institutes*, stating, “Believers . . . profit by the

law because from it they learn more thoroughly each day what the Lord’s will is like . . . . It is as if some servant, already prepared with complete earnestness of heart to commend himself to his master, must search out and oversee his master’s ways in order to conform and accommodate himself to them. Moreover, however much they may be prompted by the Spirit and eager to obey God, they are still weak in the flesh, and would rather serve sin than God. The law is to this flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to goad, stir, arouse it to work.”

In the last edition of the *Institutes* (1559), Calvin is more



## For Calvin, the believer follows God's law, not out of compulsory obedience, but out of grateful obedience.

emphatic about how believers profit from the law. First, he says, “Here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord’s will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it.” And second, it causes “frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression.” In this way the saints must press on, Calvin concludes. “For what would be less lovable than the law if, with importuning and threatening alone, it troubled souls through fear, and distressed them through fright?”

Viewing the law primarily as a guide that encourages the believer to cling to God and obey Him is another instance where Calvin differs from Luther. For Luther, the law is primarily negative. It is closely linked with sin, death, or the devil. Luther’s dominant interest is in the second use of the law, even when he considers the law’s role in sanctification. By contrast, Calvin views the law primarily as a positive expression of the will of God. As Hesselink says, “Calvin’s view could be called Deuteronomic, for to him law and love are not antithetical, but are correlates.”

# Prayer is the principal and perpetual exercise of faith and the chief element of piety, Calvin says. Prayer shows God's grace to the believer even as the believer offers praises to God and asks for His faithfulness.

For Calvin, the believer follows God's law, not out of compulsory obedience, but out of grateful obedience. Under the tutelage of the Spirit, the law prompts gratitude in the believer, which leads to loving obedience and aversion to sin. In other words, for Luther, the primary purpose of the law is to help the believer recognize and confront sin. For Calvin, the primary purpose of the law is to direct the believer to serve God out of love.

## Practical Dimensions

Although Calvin viewed the church as the nursery of piety, he also emphasized the need for personal piety. The Christian strives for piety because he loves righteousness, longs to live to God's glory, and delights to obey God's rule of righteousness set forth in Scripture. God Himself is the focal point of the Christian life—a life that is therefore carried out essentially in self-denial, particularly expressed in Christ-like cross-bearing.

For Calvin, such piety “is the beginning, middle, and end of Christian living.” It involves numerous practical dimensions for daily Christian living, which are explained thoroughly in Calvin's *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, letters, and treatises. Here's the gist of what Calvin says on prayer, repentance, and obedience as well as on pious Christian living in Chapters 6–10 of Book Three of the *Institutes* of 1559.

## Prayer

Prayer is the principal and perpetual exercise of faith and the chief element of piety, Calvin says. Prayer shows God's grace to the believer even as the believer offers praises to God and asks for His faithfulness. It communicates piety both privately and corporately.

Calvin devoted the second-longest chapter of the *Institutes* (3.20) to prayer. There are six purposes of prayer, according to Calvin: To fly to God with every need, to set all our petitions before God, to prepare us to receive God's benefits with humble gratitude, to meditate upon God's kindness, to instill the proper spirit of delight for God's answers in prayer, and to confirm His providence.

Two problems are likely to surface with Calvin's doctrine of prayer. First, when the believer obediently submits to God's will, he does not necessarily give up his own will. Rather, through the act of submissive prayer, the believer invokes God's providence to act on his behalf. Thus, man's will, under the Spirit's guidance, and God's will work together in communion.

Second, to the objection that prayer seems superfluous in light of God's omniscience and omnipotence, Calvin responds that God ordained prayer more for man as an exercise of piety than for Himself. Providence must be understood in the sense that God ordains the means along with the ends. Prayer is thus a means to receive what God has planned to bestow. Prayer is a way in which believers seek out and receive what God has determined to do for them from eternity.

Calvin treats prayer as a given rather than a problem. Right prayer is governed by rules, he says. These include praying with:

- a heartfelt sense of reverence
- a sense of need and repentance
- a surrender of all confidence in self and a humble plea for pardon
- a confident hope.



All four rules are repeatedly violated by even the holiest of God's people. Nevertheless, for Christ's sake, God does not desert the pious but has mercy for them.

Despite the shortcomings of believers, prayer is required for the increase of piety, for prayer diminishes self-love and multiplies dependence upon God. As the due exercise of piety, prayer unites God and man—not in substance but in will and purpose. Like the Lord's Supper, prayer lifts the believer to Christ and renders proper glory to God. That glory is the purpose of the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer as well as other petitions dealing with His creation. Since creation looks to God's glory for its preservation, the entire Lord's Prayer is directed to God's glory.

In the Lord's Prayer, Christ "supplies words to our lips," Calvin says. It shows us how all our prayers must be controlled, formed, and inspired by the Word of God. That alone can provide holy boldness in prayer, "which rightly accords with fear, reverence, and solicitude."

We must be disciplined and steadfast in prayer, for prayer keeps us in fellowship with Christ. We are also reassured in prayer of Christ's intercessions, without which our prayers would be rejected. Only Christ can turn God's throne of dreadful glory into a throne of grace, to which we can draw near in prayer. Prayer is the channel between God and man. It is the way in which the Christian expresses his praise and adoration of God as well as asks for God's help in submissive piety.

### Repentance

Repentance is the fruit of faith and prayer. Luther said in his *Ninety-Five Theses* that all of the Christian life should be marked by repentance. Calvin also sees repentance as a lifelong process. Repentance is not merely the start of the Christian life; it is the Christian life, he says. It involves confession of sin as well as growth in holiness. Repentance is the lifelong response of the believer to the gospel in outward life, mind, heart, attitude, and will.

Repentance begins with turning to God from the heart and proceeds from a pure, earnest fear of God. It involves dying to self and sin (mortification) and coming alive to righteousness (vivification) in Christ. Calvin does not limit repentance to an inward grace but views it as the redirection of a man's entire being to righteousness. Without a pure, earnest fear of God, a man will not be aware of the heinousness of sin or want to die to it. But mortification is essential because though sin ceases to reign in the believer, it does not cease to dwell in him. Romans 7:14–25 shows that mortification is a lifelong process. With the Spirit's help, the believer must put sin to death every day through self-denial, cross-bearing, and meditation on the future life.

Repentance is also characterized by newness of life, however. Mortification is the means to vivification, which Calvin defines as "the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising from rebirth; as if it were said that man dies to himself that he may begin to live to God." True self-denial results in a life devoted to justice and mercy. The pious both "cease to do evil" and "learn to do well." Through repentance they bow in the dust before their holy Judge, then are raised up to participate in the life, death, righteousness, and intercession of their Savior.

As Calvin writes, "For if we truly partake in his death, 'our old man is crucified by his power, and the body of sin perishes' (Rom 6:6), that the corruption of original nature may no longer thrive. If we share in His resurrection, through it we are raised up into newness of life to correspond with the righteousness of God."

The words Calvin uses to describe the pious Christian life (*reparatio, regeneratio, reformatio, renovatio, restitutio*) point back to our original state of righteousness. They indicate that a life of *pietas* is restorative in nature. Through Spirit-worked repentance, believers are restored into the image of God.

### Self-denial

Self-denial is the sacrificial dimension of *pietas*. We have seen that piety is rooted in the believer's union with Christ. The fruit of that union is self-denial, which includes the following:

1. The realization that we are not our own but belong to God. We live and die unto Him, according to the rule of His Word. Thus, self-denial is not self-centered, as was often the case in medieval monasticism, but God-centered. Our greatest enemy is neither the devil nor the world but ourselves.

2. The desire to seek the things of the Lord throughout our lives. Self-denial leaves no room for pride, lasciviousness, and worldliness. It is the opposite of self-love because it is love for God. The entire orientation of our life must be toward God.

3. The commitment to yield ourselves and everything we own to God as a living sacrifice. We then are prepared to love others and to esteem them better than ourselves, not by viewing them as they are in themselves, but by viewing the image of God in them. This uproots our love of strife and self and replaces it with a spirit of gentleness and helpfulness. Our love for others then flows from the heart, and our only limit to helping them is the limit of our resources.

Believers are encouraged to persevere in self-denial by what the gospel promises about the future consummation

of the Kingdom of God. Such promises help us overcome every obstacle that opposes self-renunciation and assist us in bearing adversity.

Furthermore, self-denial helps us find true happiness because it helps us do what we were created for. We were created to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves. Happiness is the result of having that principle restored. As Calvin says, without self-denial we may possess everything without possessing one particle of real happiness.

### Cross-bearing

While self-denial focuses on inward conformity to Christ, cross-bearing centers on outward Christlikeness. Those who are in fellowship with Christ must prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome life filled with many kinds of evil, Calvin says. The reason for this is not simply sin's effect on this fallen world, but the believer's union with Christ. Because His life was a perpetual cross, ours must also include suffering.

In this we not only participate in the benefits of His atoning work on the cross, but we also experience the Spirit's work of transforming us into the image of Christ.

Cross-bearing tests piety, Calvin says. Through cross-bearing we are roused to hope, trained in patience, instructed in obedience, and chastened in pride. Cross-bearing is our medicine and our chastisement. Through cross-bearing we are shown the feebleness of our flesh and taught to suffer for the sake of righteousness. Happily, God promises to be with us in all our sufferings. He even transforms suffering associated with persecution into comfort and blessing.

### The Present and Future Life

Through cross-bearing, we learn to have contempt for the present life when compared to the blessings of heaven. This life is nothing compared to what is to come. It is like smoke or shadow.

"If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile? If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a sepulcher?" Calvin asks. "No one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection," he concludes.

For Calvin, the pious Christian is neither weak nor passive but dynamically active in the pursuit of obedience, much like a distance runner, a diligent scholar, or a heroic warrior submitting to God's will.

Typically, Calvin uses the *complexio oppositorum* when explaining the Christian's relation to this world. In other words, he presents opposites to find a middle way between. So, on the one hand, through cross-bearing we are crucified to the world and the world to us. On the other hand, the devout Christian enjoys this present life, albeit with due restraint and moderation, for he is taught to use things in this world for the purpose that God intended them. Calvin was no ascetic; he enjoyed good literature, good food, and the beauties of nature. But he rejected all forms of earthly excess. The believer is called to Christlike moderation, which includes modesty, prudence, avoidance of display, and contentment with our lot. For it is the hope of the life to come that gives purpose to and enjoyment in our present life. This life is always straining after a better, heavenly life.

How, then, is it possible for the truly pious Christian to maintain a proper balance, enjoying the gifts that God gives in this world while avoiding the snare of over-indulgence? Calvin offers four guiding principles:

1. Recognize that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. This should restrain our lusts because our gratitude to God for His gifts cannot be expressed by a greedy reception of them.

2. Understand that if we have few possessions, we must bear our poverty patiently lest we be ensnared by inordinate desire.

3. Remember that we are stewards of the world in which God has placed us. Soon we will have to give an account to Him of our stewardship.

4. Know that God has called us to Himself and to His service. Because of that calling, we strive to fulfill our tasks in His service, for His glory, and under His watchful, benevolent eye.

### Obedience

For Calvin, unconditional obedience to God's will is the essence of piety. Piety links love, freedom, and discipline by subjecting all to the will and Word of God. Love is the overarching principle that prevents piety from degenerating into legalism. At the same time, law provides the content for love.

Piety includes rules that govern the believer's response. Privately, those rules take the form of self-denial and cross-bearing; publicly, they are expressed in the exercise of church discipline, which Calvin implemented in Geneva. In either case, the glory of God compels disciplined obedience. For Calvin, the pious Christian is neither weak nor passive but dynamically active in the pursuit of obedience, much like a distance runner, a diligent scholar, or a heroic warrior submitting to God's will.

In the preface of his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin writes: "Here is the true proof of obedience, where, bidding farewell to our own affections, we subject ourselves to God and allow our lives to be so governed by His will that things most bitter and harsh to us—because they come from Him—become sweet to us." "Sweet obedience"—Calvin welcomed such descriptions. According to Hesselink, Calvin used words such as sweet, sweetly, and sweetness hundreds of times in his *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, and treatises to describe the life of piety. Calvin writes of the sweetness of the law, the sweetness of Christ, the sweetness of consolation in the midst of adversity and persecution, the sweetness of prayer, the sweetness of the Lord's Supper, the sweetness of God's free offer of eternal life in Christ, and the sweetness of eternal glory.

He writes of the sweet fruit of election, too, saying that ultimately this world and all its glories will pass away. What gives us assurance of salvation here and hope for the life to come is that we have been "chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4). "We shall never be clearly persuaded . . . that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know the very sweet fruit of God's eternal election."

### Conclusion

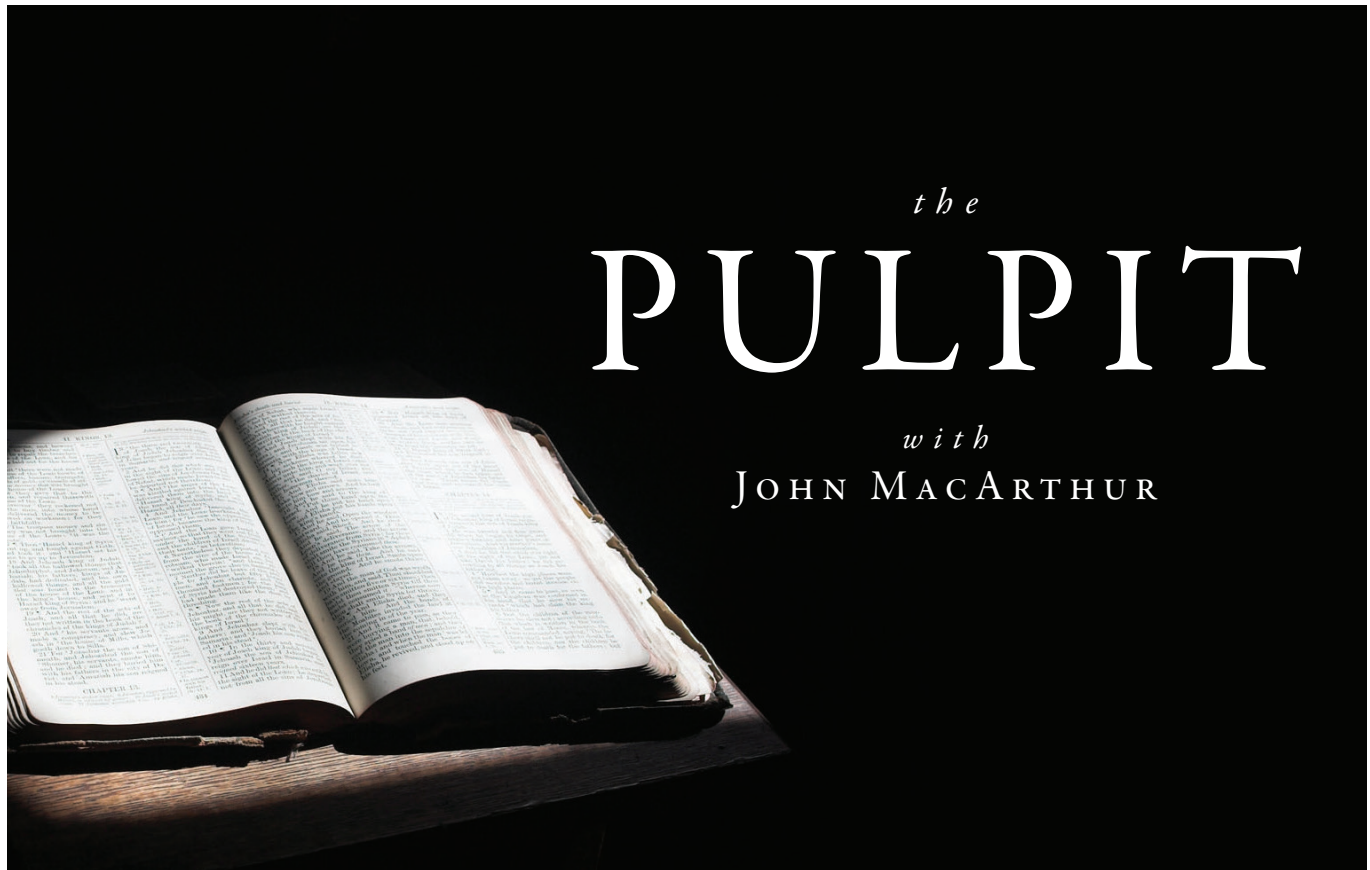
Calvin strove to live the life of *pietas* himself—theologically, ecclesiastically, and practically. At the end of his *Life of Calvin*, Theodore Beza wrote, "Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years, . . . I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of the Christian character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate."

Calvin shows us the piety of a warm-hearted Reformed theologian who speaks from the heart. Having tasted the goodness and grace of God in Jesus Christ, he pursued piety by seeking to know and do God's will every day. He communed with Christ; practiced repentance, self-denial, and cross-bearing; and was involved in vigorous social improvements. His theology worked itself out in heart-felt, Christ-centered piety.

For Calvin and the Reformers of sixteenth-century Europe, doctrine and prayer as well as faith and worship are integrally connected. For Calvin, the Reformation includes the reform of piety (*pietas*), or spirituality, as much as a reform of theology. The spirituality that had been cloistered behind monastery walls for centuries had broken down. Medieval spirituality was reduced to a celibate, ascetic, and penitential devotion in the convent or monastery. But Calvin helped Christians understand piety in terms of living and acting every day according to God's will (Rom 12:1–2) in the midst of human society. Through Calvin's influence, Protestant spirituality focused on how one lived the Christian life in the family, the fields, the workshop, and the marketplace. Calvin helped the Reformation change the entire focus of the Christian life.

Calvin's teaching, preaching, and catechizing fostered growth in the relationship between believers and God. Piety means experiencing sanctification as a divine work of renewal expressed in repentance and righteousness, which progresses through conflict and adversity in a Christ-like manner. In such piety, prayer and worship are central, both privately and in the community of believers.

The worship of God is always primary, for one's relationship to God takes precedence over everything else. That worship, however, is expressed in how the believer lives his vocation and how he treats his neighbors, for one's relationship with God is most concretely seen in the transformation of every human relationship. Faith and prayer, because they transform every believer, cannot be hidden. Ultimately, therefore, they must transform the church, the community, and the world. ♦



*the*  
PULPIT

*with*  
JOHN MACARTHUR

**O**f all the false views of our Lord's earthly life and ministry, one of the most pernicious is the portrayal of His death as that of an unwitting, unwilling victim. But in truth Jesus was no victim. In John 10:17–18 He declared, "I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again." On the contrary, His death was according to the plan and will of God. Isaiah wrote concerning the Messiah's sacrificial death, "The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him . . . the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief" (Isa 53:6, 10). In His sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter said that Jesus was "delivered over [to death] by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

As God incarnate, Jesus was always in absolute control of all the events of His life. That control extended even to the circumstances surrounding His death. Far from being

an accident, Jesus' sacrificial death was the primary reason that He took on human life in the first place; it is the pinnacle of redemptive history. Earlier in John's gospel He had said, "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour" (12:27). Instead of being taken by surprise by His execution, the Lord had repeatedly predicted it.

In keeping with his purpose of portraying Jesus as the incarnate Son of God (20:31), John depicts His majesty and glory—even as He is betrayed and arrested to be executed. The apostle skillfully demonstrates that the shameful, debasing things done to Christ failed to detract from His person, offering instead decisive proof of His glory.

In his account of Christ's betrayal and arrest, John presents four preeminent features that demonstrate His majesty and glory: His supreme courage, power, love and obedience.

#### **Christ's Supreme Courage**

His final teaching time with the eleven remaining disciples was now over, and having "spoken these words" (chs. 13–17), Jesus "went forth with His disciples." The point

made here is not that they left the upper room, but that they left Jerusalem. They had already abandoned the upper room, so that the last part of Jesus' farewell discourse, and His High Priestly Prayer, took place as He and the disciples passed through the streets of Jerusalem. As the little group left the city behind, they crossed "over the ravine of the Kidron," east of and a few hundred feet below the temple mount. The "ravine" was actually a wadi, through which water flowed during the winter rainy season.

Across the valley was the western slope of the Mount of Olives, where "there was a garden." John does not name that place, but Matthew 26:36 and Mark 14:32 call it Gethsemane. The name literally means "oil press," suggesting that this was an olive orchard. That Jesus "entered" the garden "with His disciples" and later left it (v. 4) suggests that it was an identifiable, perhaps even a walled, private garden, owned by a wealthy family of Jerusalem who allowed the Lord's use of it.

Gethsemane was well known to "Judas . . . who was betraying Him," because "Jesus had often met there with His disciples." Luke's account states that it was Jesus' custom to visit the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). That had been true throughout His ministry whenever He was in Jerusalem (cf. John 8:1). It was on the Mount of Olives that Jesus had given the detailed teaching on the signs of His return known as the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:3). He had also spent all the previous nights of Passion Week there. In addition, the Lord had frequently visited Bethany, located two miles from Jerusalem on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives.

Christ went to Gethsemane because it was a secluded place where He could pour out His heart to the Father in private. But more significantly on this night, He went there because He knew that it was where Judas would look for Him. Thus, the Lord sovereignly arranged the time and place of His betrayal. All His enemies' previous attempts to seize Him had been unsuccessful, because His hour had not yet come. But now, in the outworking of God's eternal plan, the time had come for Him to offer His life.

Meanwhile, Judas' evil plans were about to come to fruition. A few days earlier, he had approached the Jewish authorities and offered to betray the Lord. Then, earlier that evening, Judas, having been dismissed by Jesus, left to make the final arrangements for the betrayal. Now, "having received the Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees," Judas led this large crowd to Gethsemane, where he knew Jesus would be waiting.

The legionnaires were there to serve as backup for the "officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees." These members of the temple police force evidently made the



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actual arrest (since Jesus was taken first to the Jewish authorities, not the Roman governor). The large procession, with Judas in the lead (Luke 22:47), arrived "there with lanterns and torches and weapons" to seize Jesus. Evidently, they anticipated that Jesus would attempt to flee, and that they would have to search for Him on the mountainside.

But the Lord had no intention of hiding or fleeing. Instead, with majestic calmness, absolute self-control, and supreme courage, "Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth" out of the garden and met those who came to arrest Him. John's note that Jesus knew "all the things that were coming upon Him" emphasizes both His omniscience and His complete mastery of the situation. The Lord's voluntary surrender stresses again that He willingly laid down His life (John 10:17–18).

### Christ's Supreme Power

Jesus, the intended victim, took charge of the situation and "said to them, 'Whom do you seek?'" "They" (most likely the leaders), probably stating their official orders, "answered Him, 'Jesus the Nazarene.'" The Lord "said to them, 'I am He.'" The word "He" is not in the original Greek, so that as He had done before on a number of occasions (e.g., 8:24, 28, 58), Jesus was claiming for Himself the name of God from Exodus 3:14—"I AM."

Christ demonstrated His divine dominance in a stunning manner. Immediately after "He said to them, 'I am He,' they drew back and fell to the ground." All Jesus had to do was speak His name—the name of God—and His enemies were rendered helpless. This amazing demonstration of His power clearly reveals that they did not seize Jesus. He went with them willingly, to carry out the divine plan of

redemption that called for His sacrificial death.

The Bible speaks repeatedly of the power of God's spoken word. He spoke, and the heavens and earth were created; Satan and mankind were judged; the rebellious generation of Israelites died in the wilderness; and Israel went into exile for seventy years. When the Lord Jesus Christ returns, He will execute judgment on His enemies "with the sword which [comes] from [His] mouth." John's account highlights Christ's divine power; at His word His enemies were thrown backward to the ground.

### **Christ's Supreme Love**

After His stunning display of His divine power, Jesus "again asked" His dazed would-be captors, "Whom do you seek?" Picking themselves up off the ground, they parroted their orders and replied, "Jesus the Nazarene." "I told you that I am He," Jesus reminded them, and then He commanded them, "if you seek Me, let these go their way." By making His captors twice state that their orders were only to arrest Him, the Lord forced them to acknowledge that they had been given by their superiors no authority to arrest the disciples. His demand that they leave the eleven alone was backed up by the awesome power He had just displayed.

Why did Jesus shield the disciples from arrest? The Lord is the good shepherd, who protects His sheep. He is not like the hired hand who fled when he saw the wolf approaching (John 10:12–13). Jesus kept the disciples from being arrested "to fulfill the word which He spoke, 'Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one.'" This is a startling statement, meaning that He kept them from being arrested so they would not be lost. Each was a gift from the Father to the Son.

He did not lose one! The implication is that if they had been arrested, their faith would have failed and they would have lost their salvation. The Lord knew that the trauma of being arrested, imprisoned, or perhaps even executed could shatter the disciples' faith. Therefore, He made certain that they would not be taken.

Does that mean that salvation can be lost? That faith can fail? If left up to us, of course. But we will never be lost nor will saving faith fail, precisely because our Lord keeps us secure. He never allows anything to come upon us that will be more than our faith can handle.

Like the disciples, all believers are weak and vulnerable apart from the Lord's protection. However, believers can be confident that God will always keep His promise never to allow them to be tempted beyond their ability to endure. Their eternal security does not rest in their own strength, but in Christ's constant intercession and unceasing love (Rom 8:35–39) for them. "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son,"

Paul wrote, "much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom 5:10).

### **Christ's Supreme Obedience**

Sensing what was about to happen, the disciples cried out, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" Without waiting for the Lord's reply, Simon Peter, emboldened by the awesome display of Christ's divine power he had just seen, impulsively (and needlessly) charged to the Lord's defense. "Having a sword," Peter "drew it." Rather than allowing Jesus to be arrested, and feeling invincible in the wake of the Lord's display of "flattening" power, he intended to hack his way through the entire detachment. His first target was "the high priest's slave, Malchus." Peter aimed for Malchus' head, but missed (or Malchus managed to duck) "and cut off his right ear." Peter's reckless act threatened to start a battle that could wind up getting the disciples either killed or arrested—the very thing Jesus was trying to prevent.

The Lord moved immediately to defuse the situation. Sharply rebuking him, "Jesus said to Peter," in effect, "Stop! No more of this." "Put the sword into the sheath. For all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword." He was not an earthly king, who needed His followers to fight to protect Him. Had He chosen to, Jesus could have called on far more powerful defenders than the disciples.

Then the Lord "touched [Malchus'] ear and healed him." This was a further display of Christ's divine power in the span of just a few minutes. Upon seeing Him create an ear, the crowd should have fallen at His feet again and worshiped Him. But blinded by and hardened in their sin, they arrested Him, demonstrating again the truth of what John had written earlier in his gospel: "But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him" (12:37).

Peter's brave but impetuous act revealed his continued failure to understand the necessity of Jesus' death. After his ringing affirmation that Jesus was the Christ (Matt 16:16), the Lord immediately spoke to the disciples about His death (v. 21). Shocked, "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You'" (v. 22). Now that the moment had arrived, Peter still did not get it, so Jesus reminded him (and the rest of the disciples), "The cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?" The "cup" of which the Lord spoke was the cup of divine judgment which He would drain completely on the cross when God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). It was to that saving sacrifice that Christ's supreme courage, power, love, and obedience would lead. ♦



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JOHN CALVIN:  
*why* HE STILL  
MATTERS

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W. ROBERT GODFREY



There can be no serious doubt that Calvin once mattered. Any honest historian of any point of view and of any religious conviction would agree that Calvin was one of the most important people in the history of western civilization. Not only was he a significant pastor and theologian in the sixteenth century, but the movement of which he was the principal leader led to the building of Reformed and Presbyterian churches with millions of members spread through centuries around the world. Certainly, a man whose leadership, theology, and convictions can spark such a movement once mattered.

Historians from a wide range of points of view also acknowledge not only that Calvin mattered in the religious sphere and in the ecclesiastical sphere, but also that Calvin and Calvinism had an impact on a number of modern phenomena that we take for granted. Calvin is certainly associated with the rise of modern education and the conviction that citizens ought to be educated and that all people ought to be able to read the Bible. Such education was a fruit of the Reformation and Calvin.

Others have insisted that the rise of modern democracy owes at least something to the Reformed movement. One historian said of Puritanism that a Puritan was someone who would humble himself in the dust before God and would rise to put his foot on the neck of a king. Calvinists were strongly persuaded that they must serve God above men, and that began to relativize notions of superiority and aristocracy. King James I of England, who was also James VI of Scotland, once remarked as he looked at Presbyterianism in Scotland: “No bishop, no king.” If the church is not governed by a hierarchy, certainly the political world does not need to be governed by a hierarchy either. Such Calvinist attitudes toward kings helped contribute to modern democracy.

Calvinism contributed to modern science with an empirical look at the real world. Calvin contributed to the rise of modern capitalism, in part, by teaching that the charging of interest on money loaned was not immoral. He was the first Christian theologian to do so.

When we look at that list—theology, church, education, science, democracy, and capitalism—here was a man that mattered. He had a profound influence on the development of the history of the West. But does he *still* matter? Should we care today to revisit John Calvin—who he was, what he thinks—and believe that what he taught is still significant, still valuable?



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Yes, he still does matter. John Calvin matters *still* above all because he was a teacher of truth. If truth matters, then John Calvin still matters, because he was one of the great teachers of truth, one of the most insightful, faithful teachers of truth, one of the best communicators of truth. He was a teacher who had taken to heart the words of Jesus: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

A few years ago, Mr. Leon Panetta was interviewed on television when it was announced that he was going to be appointed by president-elect Obama to be the head of the CIA. In his brief remarks, Panetta commented intriguingly that in the entrance of the old CIA building were the words “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

That verse from Scripture has probably been wrenched out of context and misused more than most verses of Scripture. Often, people who are concerned about the truth and quote this verse are interested only in an abstraction about truth or in turning this verse into a poetic slogan. It sounds great: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” They seem seldom to quote the verse in context, where Jesus said, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of mine, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

John Calvin knew the context of that verse. He knew that the only way to know the truth was to know Christ’s word. And it was because he knew Christ’s word—because he studied Christ’s word, because he treasured Christ’s word—that Calvin was such a great teacher. John Calvin was a teacher of the truth of God’s Word.

A great teacher has two prime characteristics: first, he

knows what he is talking about, and second, he can communicate what he knows. Calvin was extraordinary in both of those areas. Calvin knew what he was talking about, in part, because he had a naturally brilliant mind. John Calvin received a fine education. He lived in the providence of God in a period when young scholars were able not only to become fluent in Latin, but also in Greek and Hebrew. Calvin was marvelously educated in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. That ability in language prepared him to be an extraordinarily sensitive interpreter of the Scriptures. The biblical commentaries of Calvin remain highly regarded and respected to this day.

Calvin had great natural ability of mind, which he *linked to hard work*. Calvin really did not become a very famous man until he turned 30, and when he turned 30, he had only another 24 years yet to live. The period of his great productivity was only 24 years. He died, in part, because of over-work. His collected works from those 24 years fill 58 large volumes—about 600 pages each—which is most but not all of what he accomplished in those years of work and dedication.

As Calvin neared the end of his life and as ministers of the church came to visit him, knowing that his strength was ebbing away and his health was failing, they found him unable to get out of bed but still dictating his last commentary on Joshua to a secretary. His close friend and associate Theodore Beza pled with him to rest and to conserve his energy, and Calvin's response was, "What? Would you have the Lord find me idle?" That was the dedication to which he gave his life; that was the will that drove him in spite of the fact that most of those 24 years he was not in particularly good health. He suffered from terrible headaches—probably from reading all the time—and had a malaria-like fever and kidney stones, among other illnesses. Here was a man who was able to be a great teacher because of what he knew from his amazing intensity of study, bringing together his natural brilliance and his will to work.

Calvin knew that it was not enough to know the truth only in the mind. The truth must also be in the heart. He wrote, "We are invited to a knowledge of God, but not such as, content with empty speculation, merely floats in the brain, but such as will be solid and fruitful, if rightly received and rooted in our hearts" (*Institutes* 1.5.9). People can have information that floats in the brain, even information about God. That information may even be true, but does it have any impact? Does it connect? Does it matter? Is it the passion of life?

Truth for the mind and heart was the knowledge that Calvin wanted to teach, and he was convinced that all Christians always need to be growing in that kind of

knowledge. In his commentary on John 8:32 he wrote,

Whatever progress any of us has made in the Gospel, let him know that he needs fresh additions. The reward that Christ bestows on their perseverance is to make them more familiar with Himself. By doing so, He merely adds another gift to the former, so that no man may think that he has repaid anything by way of reward. For He who puts His Word in our hearts by His Spirit is the same who daily chastens from our minds the clouds of ignorance which obscure the brightness of the Gospel.

That is a wonderful promise, that as we study Christ's word, we are always drawing closer to Him, and the more we draw closer to Him, the more the clouds of ignorance are dissipated, and the more the brightness of the gospel shines in our minds and hearts. This was a *living* knowledge for John Calvin.

Calvin was no remote academic, even though such a life may have been initially his desire. Early in his career, he had felt that he was really not cut out for the ministry. He believed that he was too shy and sometimes became too angry. He really thought his talent should lead him to be a scholar separated from the world. But the *Lord* called him to the ministry. And he labored as a minister faithfully because he was persuaded that Christians need to be fed the Word of God, and to grow in the Word of God, so that they can grow closer to God.

Calvin knew that the source of all of that knowledge, the source all of that feeding, the source of any progress that we are to make in truth, would come from knowing the Bible. For Calvin, the Bible was not some abstract source of authority or knowledge, but the living Word of God—a vital, necessary, daily authority in the Christian's life.

In one of his brief autobiographical statements in his preface to his commentary on Psalms, Calvin noted that as a young man he had been obstinately attached to the superstitions of the papacy. By that he meant that for a long time he resisted thinking on his own about religious questions and just stuck with what he had been taught by the medieval church, thinking that that church was authoritative, that church was a source of true knowledge, that church could be trusted. And he did not easily break with that training. But as a young man in his twenties, he did finally come to the conclusion that what the church had taught him was not reliable and true. And after that break, it was then to the Scriptures that he looked with confidence to be his authority.

Calvin exemplified in his life and work a determination

# The Bible must constantly challenge the way we look at the world, the way we look at our fellow men and women, the way we think about God and His world.

to seek to bring every thought captive to Christ. That was his passion, such was his confidence in the Word of God. That is also what he wanted to teach others. To quote Calvin, “Whoever, therefore, would desire to persevere in uprightness and in integrity of life, let them learn to exercise themselves daily in the study of the word of God; for, whenever a man despises or neglects instruction, he easily falls into carelessness and stupidity, and all fear of God vanishes from his mind” (*Commentary on the Psalms*, on Ps. 18:22).

Calvin was certain that many people tended very naturally to carelessness and stupidity. That is surely a lesson that does not need to be taught from Scripture; it is a lesson that pastors learn by experience! Calvin recognized, and we should recognize because it is even truer today, that we are surrounded by voices that are blaring lies. The only way to sort that out is to be sure that the Bible is constantly speaking to us—that the Bible is in our hearts and in our ears and in our mind so that that authority of the Word of God is a living and vital authority for us. The Bible must constantly challenge the way we look at the world, the way we look at our fellow men and women, the way we think about God and His world.

Calvin *found* that challenge and living authority in his study of the Bible. He was a man who certainly spent time with the Bible every day. Calvin preached probably around nine times every two weeks, frequently lectured on the Bible to students, and wrote commentaries on the Bible throughout his life—commentaries on all the books of the New Testament except Second and Third John and Revelation, and on most of the books of the Old Testament. Here is a man whose life was lived in the Bible and with the Bible, and the fruit of that was that the Bible became all the more precious to him. There really is a building up, as

Calvin put it, of “fresh additions” from the Scriptures in life and heart. The more time he spent with the Bible, the more it impressed him as unavoidably true and utterly reliable.

In addition to his preaching, letter-writing, commentary-writing and treatise-writing, one of the great works of Calvin’s life was to try to perfect his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He worked at the *Institutes* through most of his adult life. He published the first edition of the *Institutes* when he was about twenty-six years old as a small book. It contained six chapters and was immediately recognized as brilliant. It was intended to be a book to help common people understand the basics of the Christian faith. But he kept working on it, kept expanding it, and reshaped it so that it would be an introduction to theology for theological students. And he finally brought it out in the form with which he was satisfied in 1559, only five years before he died. It was then five times the size it had been when it first came out.

Calvin divided the *Institutes* into four books, following roughly the Apostles’ Creed. The first book was on the Father and His work, creation, and providence. The second book was on the Son and His work of redemption and the gospel. Book Three was on the Holy Spirit as the giver of faith, and Book Four covered how Christ helps us in nurturing our faith, focusing on the church and the sacraments. In this marvelous work, Calvin begins to lay a foundation for theological students concerning what they need to know about what God’s Word has taught them. A person who looks at each of these books will find amazing treasures. We do not have time to look at them all, but I want to mention a couple of things from each of the books.

First of all, in the first book on the Father, one of the great themes of Calvin’s teaching comes through, one of the great themes of the Bible, and that is the theme of

providence. God is in charge. God is in charge of everything. God works all things according to the counsel of His will. And for Calvin, this is not a philosophical concept. Calvin was a kind of practical lawyer deep in his soul. He was not all that interested in philosophy, and providence was certainly not a philosophical nicety for him. It was the most practical truth one could have—to know that whatever happens in life, God is behind it. God is working it out. God is accomplishing His purpose. There is nothing meaningless in life; there is nothing accidental in life; there is nothing that happens while God is looking the other way.

Calvin found this truth in many biblical passages: “Not a hair falls from your head,” “Not a bird falls from the sky.” Calvin rightly argued religiously, if God keeps track of every one of those little insignificant things that none of us keeps track of, how much more does he keep track of everything happening in the lives of His people? Calvin felt that providence was such an important doctrine for daily living. It is a doctrine that is humbling when things are going well so that we dare not think that it is by our own strength that we have accomplished what we have accomplished. What do we have that God has not given us?

The doctrine of providence is humbling, but it is also encouraging and difficult. It is easy to say God loves us when all is going well. It is harder to think God loves us when things are going badly. Calvin said we have to cultivate in our Christian lives a confidence that God is our Father in the good times and in the bad times.

In one of his most remarkable statements, which again he wrote in the preface to his commentary on Psalms, Calvin said, “We renounce the guidance of our own affections, and submit ourselves entirely to God, leaving him to govern us, and to dispose our life according to his will, so that the afflictions which are the bitterest and most severe to our nature, become sweet to us, because they proceed from him.” Since God is in control of all things, all things that He brings into our lives are ultimately good. If we believe that, we can embrace even the bitterest afflictions because they come from him.

Now, this was not a statement Calvin made from an ivory tower. Rather, he made it as a man who late in his life every year handed graduation diplomas to graduates from his seminary and heard students joke as they walked

## There is nothing meaningless in life; there is nothing accidental in life; there is nothing that happens while God is looking the other way.

away that their diploma was their death certificate. Many of them went off to preach the gospel in France and died as martyrs for the faith. Their Calvinist confidence in God bore remarkable fruit in their lives because they lived in confidence that God was their Father.

One important aspect of Book Two of the *Institutes* shows us that God comes to be our Father and to be reconciled to us through Jesus Christ. In the second book, Calvin marvelously develops the work of Jesus Christ in terms of his three offices: prophet, priest, and king. Calvin is the first in the history of the church to develop the work of Christ in terms of those three offices. Martin Bucer had talked about it but had never developed it. Calvin is the pioneer here.

What has Christ done for us? He has been our prophet—He has told us the truth, the full truth of God’s saving plan. What has Christ done for us? He has been our priest—He has offered Himself as a sacrifice in our place to cover our sin, that we might belong to Him. What has Christ done for us? He has been our king—He has promised us an eternal kingdom that will never pass away and never be shaken into which He will take us by His power. He has also promised us right now that we are citizens of that kingdom. Right now we enjoy His kingship and His care for us. That is His promise to us.

Book Three of the *Institutes* is above all about faith. B. B. Warfield once said that John Calvin was *the* great theologian of the Holy Spirit. Warfield was certainly right, but Calvin was an even greater theologian of faith. To read the third book of the *Institutes*, seeing what Calvin has to say about faith in those chapters, is to come as close as any uninspired author has ever come to making clear what true

faith is: how it rests in Christ, how it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, how it was planned from all eternity in God's electing purpose, and how the Holy Spirit draws us to Christ and fills us with confidence that for Christ's sake we are saved now and forever.

Probably Calvin's most distinctive teaching is this, that we can know not only that *today* we belong to Christ, that *today* we have true faith, but that we can know because of the promise of God that *tomorrow* we will belong to Christ, and *forever* we will belong to Christ. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." It was not John Calvin who said this, of course, but John Calvin quoted it and believed it. If Jesus Christ is our savior today, He will be our savior tomorrow. This conviction is a great source of Calvinist confidence. Calvin gave us a genuine biblical religion that knows that what God has begun in the hearts of His people He will bring to fruition.

In Book Four of the *Institutes*, we can look particularly at the great attention Calvin gave to the sacraments. Why did he do that? In part, he did it because Christians are so good at fighting about the sacraments: how many, who should receive them, what exactly do they do. These are all important questions. But at the root of Calvin's passion for the sacraments was his conviction that God gave us the sacraments because we needed them.

Really great teachers say very simple things. Many of us get so embroiled when we think about sacraments and all the controversies that we may miss this simple point that Calvin stressed: God gave us the sacraments because we need them. And why do we need them? We need them because we are so weak in ourselves that we regularly forget the most basic truths.

The sacraments come to minister the most basic truths of the Bible to our souls. Baptism ministers to us the truth that only the blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse us, and the Lord's Supper ministers to us that only the body and blood of Jesus Christ will be our food for everlasting life. We need that helpful reminder and strength in our weakness, Calvin said. We need that reassurance. We keep forgetting that true religion is all about Jesus. We keep being distracted by ourselves: what we are doing, and how we are doing. For Calvin, the sacraments always draw us back to Christ. No cleansing except by the blood of Christ. No food for everlasting life except His body and blood.

In this brief look at the *Institutes*, we can see Calvin was a great theologian and a great teacher, motivated above all by his concern to be a faithful pastor. He was concerned not only that people be able to answer theological questions, but that their hearts and lives would be changed by the wonderful truth of who God is. By God's grace, He accomplished

that. He still matters because He was and is such a great teacher. The *Institutes* is still one of the great books to read in theology, and part of its greatness is the way we experience a pastoral longing to communicate the truth that sets us free.

Calvin was a great teacher because he knew so much and because he was an effective communicator. He was an effective communicator as a preacher. People heard him gladly in his own day. He was also an effective communicator because he was a powerful writer. He helped refine the French language in his French writing; he helped refine elegant writing in his Latin writing. He was an effective communicator also because he thought of the people who were hearing him. Various audiences evoked different kinds of communication from him.

Calvin was not only a great communicator in his preaching and in his writing; he was a great communicator in recognizing that truth needs to be transmitted through institutions that will carry that knowledge on from generation to generation. In our modern world, where the individual is so important, we often think too individualistically. Calvin was better than that, realizing that part of effective communication is developing ways in which the truth may be transmitted through institutions from generation to generation.

This institutional sensitivity is part of the reason that Calvin was very concerned about the church and its organization. The church is one of those critical institutions that are responsible to teach the truth and see to its transmission. So, Calvin set up in Geneva expressions of the church with different sorts of responsibilities relative to the truth. He established what was known as the Venerable Company of Pastors, whose work was to teach sound doctrine and to ensure that the truth was being maintained in the church.

He set up the Consistory, or church council, which was primarily a meeting of elders chaired by a minister supervising the moral life of the community. Calvin was very concerned that Christianity make a difference in the lives of people. People guilty of any number of public sins would be called before the Consistory so that the elders could press upon them the duty of repentance. Part of the reason that they had communion only four times a year in Geneva was because the elders had to visit every family before every communion.

Calvin established a diaconate. Geneva, in the years Calvin was there, almost doubled in size because of the influx of religious refugees. Many people arrived, having left everything behind, with very little to support themselves. The deacons took on themselves the resettlement of thousands

of refugees to help them find housing and work. Calvin had taught the people who followed him that if they were being forced into false worship and false religion, they only had two choices. One was to stay and be persecuted, even enduring martyrdom. The second was to flee into exile. He rejected all compromise. For exiles who came to Geneva, the church was ready to help. People lived out the truth.

Calvin also sought an institutionalization of truth through his catechizing. When he returned to Geneva after his time in Strasbourg, one of the things that he was most eager to do was to prepare a catechism so that young people could be instructed in the truth. And when the city council finally gave him permission to write and publish and use a catechism, he began to write it as fast as he could, because he knew that the city council was unreliable and might change its mind. He wanted to get it done before they could withdraw permission. The story goes that he literally sat at his desk writing the catechism, and every time he got about two questions and answers written, the material would be taken off to the printer so it could be typeset. Later in his life, Calvin said that he wished he could have read it over once and revised it before it was printed.

There are some wonderful things in that catechism, but it is not one of the great Reformation catechisms. Its content and form reflect the haste in which it was written. Some of the students in Geneva probably liked it, though, because several times the question gives a long theological statement which ends with, "Isn't that right?" And the catechumen is to memorize the response, "Quite so."

Calvin also wanted to encourage his fellow ministers, so he established a weekly Friday night gathering of ministers where one minister would preach, usually Calvin, but others as well, and then there would be a discussion of the sermon. It was a way of not only deepening religious knowledge, but also helping ministers becoming better preachers. It was an institutionalization of his teaching.

Finally, and very importantly, Calvin established schools in Geneva. The function of the school was two-fold. First of all, Calvin wanted the people of Geneva to be taught to read. We tend to take reading for granted. We do not realize that for much of the history of the western world, many people could not read. During the century before Calvin, probably the vast majority of people could not read. But Calvin and other leading Reformers were

## Calvin still matters because the church still needs truth.

passionately committed to the notion that if they were to promote a Bible-based religion, people must be able to read the Bible. If it is really true that reading the Bible every day is a defense against the devil and a defense against those clouds of ignorance and a way in which the brightness of the gospel will shine in our hearts, then people ought to be able to read the Bible.

The second function of the school was to prepare educated ministers. Calvin really believed that ministers needed to be able to read Greek and Hebrew so that they could draw as close to the Word of God as possible. By drawing close to the Word of God, they would be more effective in feeding the people the Word of God.

Calvin was a great teacher because he really knew the Bible, and because he found ways to communicate effectively what he learned. As a teacher, he was eager to lead others to a sense of certainty about the truth. He believed that the Bible was not only true and reliable and helpful, but he believed it was understandable, so that people could come to a certain, undoubted knowledge of the truth, not tossed about by every wind of doctrine. They could know the truth and the truth would set them free. Free from what? Free from sin, free from the devil, free from ignorance, free from the lies of false religion. And it was with that confidence in that truth that those graduates from Geneva went forth to preach in France and often to die. It was with that confidence that the Reformed church was able to spread throughout Europe and later the world.

Calvin still matters because the church still needs truth communicated effectively so that we might be sure that we know the truth, that we have been set free by the truth, and that we will live forever in Jesus who is the truth. John Calvin still matters because while he has many spiritual children, he remains, in my judgment, one of the greatest teachers the church has ever known in his balance, as well as in his insight and his passion. Time spent with John Calvin is time still well spent, and still a blessing for the church today. ♦



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JOHN CALVIN  
*as* PASTOR

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SHAWN D. WRIGHT



Everyone seems to have a strong opinion about John Calvin. Charles Spurgeon did. He said, “The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin’s system is the nearest to perfection.” Another preacher had a more negative view. Even supposedly “neutral” and scholarly sources like the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* cannot help claiming that “Calvin was the ‘cruel’ and ‘the unopposed dictator of Geneva.’” So much for scholarly objectivity! Even Calvin’s contemporaries had varied evaluations of him. One of his best friends and his chosen successor, Theodore Beza, eulogized him in this way: “I have been a witness of him for sixteen years, and I think that I am fully entitled to say that in this man there was exhibited to all an example of the life and death of the Christian, such as it will not be easy to depreciate, and it will be difficult to imitate.”

Jerome Bolsec was another early biographer of Calvin. He, though, had been run out of Geneva by Calvin and the city authorities for his attack on predestination and later reverted to Catholicism. Here’s his evaluation of the Genevan:

It seems that in our day this enemy of God and Christian unity [that is, Satan] has gathered most of the described heresies and false doctrines already long refuted and condemned and stowed them away in the city of Geneva through Jean Calvin of Noyon, a man, among others of the world, ambitious, presumptuous, arrogant, cruel, malicious, vindictive and, above all, ignorant.

If nothing else, this shows us that the study of Calvin is a very interesting subject indeed.

In this article, I am not going to prove definitively that Calvin was good, or bad for that matter. I have much more modest aims. I hope to show that John Calvin, the great Reformed theologian, was a pastor. This is often overlooked as we think of Calvin the systematic theologian or the biblical scholar. He was these things, but his fundamental occupation was as a shepherd of the flock of God.

Those who were associated with Calvin (such as Beza, Guillaume Farel, and Martin Bucer), those who wrote Calvin seeking his ministerial advice, and those who heard him regularly preach in one of the three churches in Geneva knew that he was at heart a pastor. Ministry consumed Calvin’s life. After his “sudden conversion” to the Lord, as he called it, Calvin’s life—except for an aborted attempt to



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be a reclusive scholar—was consumed with the labors of a pastor.

We can see this in numerous ways. First of all, we can read the agendas that Calvin wrote directing the Genevan church to change in a more biblical direction. His *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* as well as his *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church* fall into this category. Second, we can peruse his Catechism, written to clarify basic Christian doctrines and instruct the populace of Geneva in the new-found truth of Protestantism. This was important enough to Calvin that he revised it and released it in a second edition. Third, we can look at Calvin’s massive epistolary output, quite a bit of which is pastoral in nature. He was often asked to pastor persons from a distance, through letters, and he did so willingly and thoroughly. Fourth, we can pay attention to the many liturgical innovations that Calvin wrought first in Strasbourg and then throughout his ministry for about twenty-three years, from 1541 to 1564, in Geneva. Not only did Calvin the pastor work tirelessly to produce an order of service for the young church and write out special orders for the sacrament of the eucharist and the celebration of marriages, but he also pioneered efforts in the Reformed churches to prioritize the singing of the Psalms in corporate worship. Fifth, we can pay attention to Calvin’s sermons, regularly filled with sensitive, or forceful, applications directed to the weary Genevan congregation. Sixth, we can notice several of Calvin’s occasional treatises that are, at heart, pastoral in nature. For example, his reply to Sadoleto may be the best short introduction to the pastoral flavor of Calvin’s thought. In all of these ways, we see that Calvin was a pastor.

We also see Calvin's pastoral emphasis in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for which Calvin is most famous. When we remember that *institutio* meant "instruction" for Calvin and that Calvin's first audience in this book was not seminary students but rather Protestant pastors and laypeople—as is shown by Calvin's own translations of the *Institutes* out of Latin into French so that the beleaguered French Protestants could read it—we get a firm clue that this greatest of all Protestant reformational treatises is intensely pastoral. For the sake of time, we will limit our attention to Calvin's pastoral theology as seen in his *Institutes*.

### Calvin's Pastoral Theology in the *Institutes*

Indeed, it may be its pastoral orientation that makes the *Institutes* so relevant for twenty-first-century readers. This pastoral focus, which gives the *Institutes* its "feet," so to speak, allows modern readers to connect so familiarly with Calvin, even though he inhabited a different world—several religious, political, social, and intellectual revolutions ago. In fact, Calvin's "pastoral vision," that is, his view of the priority of God and a relationship that all human beings must have with Him in either friendship or judgment, permeates the *Institutes* and makes it intensely relevant for us. For Pastor Calvin would remind us that although we may not be newly Protestantized French refugees concerned with maintaining our liberties from Savoy and France and often frustrated by the heavy-handed policies of big-brother Bern, we are the same sort of persons as they were, having to do with the same God, and on a similar pilgrimage to the same destinies.

At the very beginning of the *Institutes*, we are confronted with Calvin's pastoral emphasis. Here he lays out the rubric he will employ for the next 1,487 pages (in the standard English translation). Calvin's entrée for the whole work is this: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." We must know God; and we must know ourselves. These two "knowledges" are correlative, related to each other in such a way that in order to do the one, we must do the other. We see that Calvin was not merely about increasing his readers' data set; he didn't just want to give them more information. His labors had a relational end. His goal was to bring his readers into a relationship with the living God, and this relationship would be enriched as they understood themselves—and themselves in relation to God—better.

Just a few pages later, Calvin gives us another glimpse into the pastoral motivation for the *Institutes*. His goal in this work is to develop heart-felt "piety" in his readers. This

piety will lead them into a growing, more vibrant relationship with the Lord. Note his logic:

I call "piety" that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.

He goes on to elaborate this even more. True knowledge of God, he notes, is extremely relational and affectionate. This is the knowledge he desires for his readers. "What help is it," he asks, "to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?" True knowledge of God leads to two vibrant realities in a person's life: first, it teaches one to "fear and reverence" the sovereign Lord; second, "with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and, having received it, to credit it to his account."

We see, then, that Calvin's goal is not just greater intellectual understanding on the part of his readers. The intellectual understanding he hopes to impart throughout the *Institutes* has two tangible goals. Whether or not these goals are met in his readers will, in effect, determine whether or not they have begun the journey to having true knowledge of God. On the one hand, he hopes that God will be honored as believers learn more about Him and show Him greater reverence. On the other hand, he desires that believers will worship God more wholeheartedly and seek their every good from Him. He thus ends the second brief chapter of the work by summarizing his goal. He desires for his readers "pure and real religion," which is "faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law." Pure religion, according to Pastor Calvin, is gauged by its tangible effects in one's life.

It would be well worth your time to read and ponder Calvin's first two chapters in the *Institutes*, which are just nine pages long, if you've not had the opportunity to do that before. But I want to focus on three other things as I attempt to outline the contours of Calvin's pastoral theology. First, I will try to quickly sketch out for us John Calvin's "pastoral vision." Second, I will briefly note the important role Calvin assigns to pastors as the central human agents in implementing and teaching this pastoral vision. Third, I will show the way that Calvin applied this pastoral vision in two instances in the *Institutes*.

## Pastoral Vision

Let's first of all then notice Calvin's "pastoral vision." As far as I know, Calvin never used the word "worldview" to speak of this. But that is what I am attempting to unpack in Calvin. What was Calvin's pastoral worldview—his vision of reality that influenced what he did, wrote, preached, and prayed? Like you and me, Calvin believed things that deeply influenced his pastoral practice. That vision encompasses at least five different aspects.

The first aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision is the glorious God. God is the one constant reality in the universe. Although Calvin does not include a section elaborating on the existence and attributes of God—except for a rather brief discussion of the divine Trinity—the Lord is in many ways the central actor in the *Institutes*. He is the sovereign King, around whom everything in His creation revolves. Thus, he truly is the Lord. He is holy and majestic, and therefore all worship is due to Him. We are all obligated, thus, to adore him: "Adoration," says Calvin, "I call the veneration and worship that each of us, in submitting to [God's] greatness, renders to him." We submit to God's greatness and give Him worship. "We should wish," Calvin observes, "God to have the honor he deserves; men should never speak or think of him without the highest reverence."

In addition to being gloriously majestic, the Lord is also the Father of His children. Therefore, they are to find their joy in knowing Him. Calvin stresses throughout the *Institutes* that sinners—dead in their sin and confirmed in their opposition to God—cannot save themselves. God must do that, and He does that through His regenerating activity. There is no such reality as "free will" in sinners that allows them to seek spiritual good; for that they require "special grace, which only the elect receive through regeneration." In another place, Calvin very affectionately recounts that the Lord gives us "great occasion" "to contemplate his mercy" by often pursuing "miserable sinners with unwearied kindness, until he shatters their wickedness by imparting benefits and by recalling them to him with more than fatherly kindness!" So, Christians should rejoice in God and find their greatest joy in knowing Him and being forgiven by Him.

The second aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision is his view of humanity. Remember, Calvin stresses that we must know ourselves if we are to know God better. So, what must we know about ourselves? What did Pastor Calvin know about the people he was shepherding?

We could begin by noting Calvin's discussion in Book One, on God the Creator, where he recounts that, as those

# Calvin stresses that we must know ourselves if we are to know God better.

who are the creatures, we are absolutely dependent on God. God not only created us, but He sustains our every breath, and providentially does all for us. We are absolutely dependent on Him. The fact that we are created in God's image brings great potential to humanity—not the least of which is knowing the living Lord. The problem, though, is that the image has been starkly shattered through Adam's sin. As those with great potential, then, we require someone outside of us to save us. This becomes the foundation for later "Calvinism's" soteriology and its emphasis on monergism, the necessity of God's saving His people.

But I want to trace out Calvin's view of humanity from more of a pastoral angle. Calvin believed that persons were extremely complicated. They can be viewed from several perspectives, all of which need to be engaged by God's truth if it is to result in their eternal good. Of course, people are thinking beings. That's why Calvin taught them the truth, so that they would know the truth and be conformed to it. That point alone accounts for the almost Herculean efforts of the Reformer to explain, comment on, and preach biblical truth for most of his adult life.

But we must note that Calvin believed people were more than intellects. They were also affectionate beings, filled with love for various things. These affections were often misplaced, so that if men were not honoring the true God, they will almost have to find some false god to reverence because of their very nature to love something. This recognition of people's God-given affectionate nature probably accounts for Calvin's desire to have the Psalms sung in Christian worship; music was a gift of God useful in tuning the affections of God's people towards Him. It also explains Calvin's stark—and sometimes surprising—affectionate language about the importance of loving God our Father. Christians are those who should be growing in love for God in our piety and who should take more and more joy in knowing Christ.

But there's yet another aspect to human nature; we're

more than knowing and loving beings. We're also beings who have, and who seek, experiences. Calvin did not deny the experiential importance of knowing God. Perhaps we see this aspect of persons most strikingly in Calvin's explanation of what takes place when a Christian receives the Lord's Supper. Although Calvin has numerous definite things to assert about the eucharist, at one point he admits that he cannot define exactly what transpires when a Christian receives the elements. Ultimately, it is a "mystery, which I see that I do not even sufficiently comprehend with my mind." So, Calvin continues,

I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher than I can lead them. For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. [Do you sense Calvin's experiences here?] Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express.

The eucharist is something a Christian ultimately experiences, even though its significance cannot be finally understood.

Calvin didn't try to dichotomize the various components of human nature. He addressed his congregation—and his readers—as multifaceted, complicated people. And all of our being needs to be engaged with biblical reality so that we not only know ourselves but also grow in knowledge of God—as we know Him and His care for us, as we grow in love toward Him, and as we experience His goodness and faithfulness to us. Indeed, I believe that you see Calvin alluding to each of these three components in humanity in his discussion of "piety" and "true religion" that we looked at previously.

The third aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision concerns the chief mark of a Christian, faith in Jesus Christ. Faith—belief in Christ and trust in His death for you—is the chief defining point of a Christian, according to Calvin. Thus, the Reformer takes pains to stress the sufficiency of Christ's death for sinners. There is nothing lacking in the atoning work of the Mediator that should leave us trembling before the judgment seat of God. No, Christ has made complete atonement. And, even more than that, by faith a believer is now united with Christ. Present union with Christ is, in fact, one of Calvin's chief doctrines. These derive from

faith, which Calvin defines as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." So, Calvin viewed his congregation as those saved by the mercy of the Father, through the sacrifice of the Son, granted faith by the Holy Spirit, and presently united to Christ by faith.

Although we might conclude from this that Calvin, therefore, viewed the life of a Christian as a comfortable, easy period on the way to heaven, this would be to neglect the fourth aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision. Calvin thought the life of a Christian was a battle, an extremely difficult pilgrimage as the believer wearily struggled to get to his final home in heaven. And the battle, according to Calvin, was brutal. It involved spiritual forces that were out to shipwreck the faith of Christians—if that were possible. Not only were Christians assaulted by spiritual forces outside of themselves, but they were also hindered by their remaining sin. The life of a Christian was thus a life of denying himself; a life of continual repentance exemplified in the habit of bearing Christ's cross by humbly submitting to God.

One of Calvin's great pastoral burdens was, then, not just to strengthen his readers for the battle. It was also to remind them that the battle—with its many attendant hardships—was normal. This is what they should expect in this life. Calvin spells this out in great detail in the only part of the *Institutes* that was published as a separate entity during his lifetime: his discussion of the Christian life in Book Three. But he alludes to it in other places as well. For example, while refuting Servetus' over-realized eschatology, Calvin observes,

I admit, indeed, that in believing Christ we at once pass from death into life. But at the same time we must remember that saying of John's: although we know that "we are the children of God, it does not yet appear . . . until we shall become like him, when we shall see him as he is." Although, therefore, Christ offers us in the gospel a present fullness of spiritual benefits, the enjoyment thereof ever lies hidden under the guardianship of hope, until, having put off corruptible flesh, we be transfigured in the glory of him who goes before us. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit bids us rely upon the promises, whose authority with us ought to silence all the barkings of that unclean dog [Servetus].

The fifth aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision is its eternal scope. We've already seen the manner in which Calvin spoke

of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. The pilgrimage was a journey to heaven for believers. At the final resurrection, in heaven, they would experience God's gracious presence in its fullness. Unbelievers, however, would receive eternal punishment for their proud dismissal of God's lordship in their lives.

This eternal reality influenced all that Calvin did as a pastor. He was shepherding people who would live forever—either in God's glorious presence in joy, or suffering God's wrathful vengeance in hell. Heaven would be glorious, and Calvin urged his readers to think often of this truth, especially since, in this life, "hardships distress us." "He alone," Calvin asserts, "has fully profited in the gospel who has accustomed himself to continual meditation upon the blessed resurrection." We see his pastoral heart shining forth when he encourages his readers that, although we can't speak definitively about our experience of heaven now, in that day, "in the very sight of it there will be such pleasantness, such sweetness in the knowledge of it alone . . . that this happiness will far surpass all the amenities that we now enjoy."

On the other hand, hell would be awful; its reality should, in an opposite fashion, fill unbelievers with dread. Hell is eternal in nature because "God's majesty, and also his justice, which they have violated by sinning, are eternal." So, Calvin presses upon his readers the dreadful reality of hell:

Because no description can deal adequately with the gravity of God's vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is, by darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth, unquenchable fire, an undying worm gnawing at the heart. By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread . . . . So we ought especially to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched it is to be cut off from all fellowship with God. And not that only but so to feel his sovereign power against you that you cannot escape being pressed by it.

John Calvin pastored with eternity—and the eternal condition of his listeners and readers—always in his mind.

## The pastor's role, wedded to the teaching of the Word, is to bring comfort to those who by grace are God's children.

This, then, is the outline of Calvin's pastoral worldview. First, its God-centeredness. Second, its robust view of humanity. Third, its stress on the work of Christ and the necessity of trusting him. Fourth, its admission that the Christian life is the path of a difficult pilgrimage. And, fifth, its eternal focus.

### **The Role of the Pastor in Implementing This Pastoral Vision**

Now we can look briefly at Calvin's view of the role of the pastor in the implementation of this "pastoral vision." First of all, we can note Calvin's own statements about the role of a pastor. The pastor of God's church "is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable." The pastor is not to hide the realities of life; rather, he is to strengthen believers for the battle they are in.

Calvin makes a similar statement in his discussion on the value of a Christian privately speaking about his troubles to his pastor; "he should beg the private help of him whose duty it is," Calvin reminds his readers, "both publicly and privately to comfort the people of God by the gospel teaching." The pastor's role, wedded to the teaching of the Word, is to bring comfort to those who by grace are God's children.

In Book Four, "The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein,"—the longest of the four books in the *Institutes*—Calvin speaks at length about the role of the pastor. He notes there that the pastor's task is essential to the growth, edification, and perseverance of the church. The pastor is essential not only as a counselor and comforter; he is also essential as a preacher of truth and an example of faithfulness in the midst of the Christian pilgrimage.

God is the only one who can change Christians; more

than that, He is the only one who can sustain them in the hardships of life on their journey to heaven. So, His voice must be heard in the church. And His voice is heard through the voice of the preacher. Thus, Calvin notes that “among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race is the singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.” It is for this reason that, throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin argues that the Word of God and the Spirit of God function in tandem with each other.

The error of groups such as the Catholic Church and the radical Anabaptists is that they in effect try to separate the Spirit of God from His Word. But a faithful pastor will not do that. He will recognize that the Spirit functions by giving and sustaining vital Christian life through His Word preached. Therefore, he will preach the Word. And, lastly, he will model this very same Word for believers. Calvin stresses the importance of evident piety in the lives of pastors. “Learning joined with piety” is Calvin’s way of speaking of the requirements of a pastor. Or, as he also says, the only ones who should be chosen by the church to be their pastors are ones “who are of sound doctrine and of holy life.”

In this, the church needs to trust the Lord to supply them with orthodox and pious pastors, for “[t]hose whom the Lord has destined for such a high office, he first supplies with the arms required to fulfill it, that they may not come empty-handed and unprepared.” The living God must be heard by His people. And He will be heard by them; He accomplishes this as pastors faithfully proclaim His Word to His people and as they try to model to His people true Christian piety.

### Application of Pastoral Vision


Moving to our third section, I now want to show the way in which Calvin operated pastorally in two particular doctrines in the *Institutes*. These two—first, God’s sovereignty in providence and predestination, and, second, the purpose of prayer in the Christian’s life—are helpful examples of what we see Calvin doing in the pages of the *Institutes*. Throughout, Calvin makes two regular pastoral applications: first, the necessity of submitting to and adoring the sovereign God and, second, the offer of comfort to weary

Christians by reminding them of the reality of their sovereign heavenly Father. These pastoral applications permeate all of the *Institutes*.

### *God’s Sovereignty in Providence and Predestination*

First, then, we will notice the manner in which Calvin dealt with the sovereign authority of God, especially as he presented it in his discussion of providence and predestination. Notably, Calvin carefully defines his understanding of providence: “Providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events.”

In the course of his discussion of providence, Calvin takes pains to differentiate carefully his understanding from numerous deviations from the truth. On the one hand, Calvin’s is not a fatalistic doctrine. In providentially governing His creation, the Lord makes use of secondary agents who do what they want to do, yet who, in the process, are culpable for their choices. The Lord is thus completely sovereign, but He never sins. On the other hand,



Calvin urges his readers to trust tenaciously in God's providence because of the numerous benefits which will come into such a person's life.

Calvin spends much of his discussion defending the point, as he says, that “nothing at all in the world is undertaken without [God’s] determination.” God determines everything that happens. He is in complete, absolute control of everything that occurs in His creation. Everything. Even that which is difficult for us to understand and which may be hard for us to accept. Our weaknesses do not limit God’s authority.

But what is Calvin’s pastoral reason for stressing God’s perfect, sovereign providence? Fortunately, the Reformer does not leave us wondering but tells us explicitly what

his two pastoral motivations are. First of all, he notes that only such a doctrinal presentation glorifies God. People who deny God's complete providence "defraud God of his glory." Any presentation that neuters God's involvement and carrying out of His purpose in the world is not only an error. One may even be motivated by a desire to get God "off the hook" for evil. As well-intentioned as Calvin's detractors may be, though, nevertheless, they are robbing God of His glory. The Lord will be known and worshiped as the One whose "will is said to be the cause of all things . . . [H]is providence [is] the determinative principle for all human plans and works." A biblical notion of providence thus honors God the creator and sustainer.

On the other hand, only this robust view of God's providential ordering of the universe can comfort Christians in this troubled life. Calvin notes this in the same context where he initially argues that providence alone brings glory to God. There he says that "in times of adversity believers comfort themselves with the solace that they suffer nothing except by God's ordinance and command, for they are under his hand." Those who fight against the doctrine of providence thus deny themselves "a most profitable doctrine." Calvin the pastor calls on his readers to submit to the clear testimony of Scripture. It is for our good that we do this.

In fact, nothing can be more profitable for a Christian than to be convinced of this truth. If one does not believe God's perfect providence, he has entered treacherous waters where the evil and unbounded forces of the world can have their way with the Christian. In a sense, the non-providence-believing Christian is stupidly denying himself the precious certainty of God's fatherly care for him. So, Calvin urges his readers to trust tenaciously in God's providence because of the numerous benefits which will come into such a person's life. That person will display "gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future," says Calvin.

We see, then, the way in which Calvin pastorally frames his discussion of providence. He appeals to two goods that result from a Christian's holding to this biblical truth. God is glorified. And the Christian is comforted. The two are not antithetical but work perfectly together for a believer who is growing in piety to reverence and love his God. As Calvin states, a Christian restrains himself "from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone; but, because [he] loves and reveres God as Father, [he] worships and adores him as Lord." God receives the worship that is His due, and the Christian believer is comforted in knowing God as his heavenly

Father.

We can be briefer in pointing out Calvin's pastoral emphases in his discussion of predestination, since in many ways this doctrine is a specific application of God's providence, according to Calvin. Predestination is God sovereignly determining from eternity past whom He will graciously save and whom He will justly condemn.

Calvin does not shy away from asserting that this predestination activity of God is "double," encompassing both those elected for salvation and those elected for damnation. "We call predestination God's eternal decree," says Calvin, "by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death." Or, as he asserts in another place,

As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation.

Calvin spends a great deal of time noting the biblical rationale for this assertion. As he says, the doctrine must be taught because it highlights in poignant fashion that God's grace is the reason for our salvation, and in this God is glorified.

But of great interest to us in the pastoral usefulness of this doctrine according to Calvin. First of all, Calvin points out that belief in this doctrine—according to which God is both the sole efficient agent of salvation and the just judge of those condemned to hell—functions at one level to glorify God. The Lord stands out according to this doctrine as "the Lord." No one can oppose His desire to act as He chooses.

This is especially clear in the case of the reprobate, those whom God determines will be damned. In discussing the Lord's rejection of Esau, for instance, Calvin notes that it would have been most easy for the Lord to say that he rejected Esau because of the evil works he performed. But He didn't do that. Rather, God "contents himself with a different

solution, that the reprobate are raised up to the end that through them God's glory may be revealed."

Throughout his discussion, Calvin argues that we must let God determine what God will determine about persons; His will alone will be done. Rather than seeking to implicate God for injustice in election, we must remember that "God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he willed it, must be considered righteous." We must not be embarrassed to discuss this doctrine, as if God were embarrassed by it. If He were, He wouldn't have put it in Scripture. Calvin notes this while commenting on Romans 9:20–21. Paul, he notes, "did not look for loopholes of escape as if he were embarrassed in his argument but showed that the reason of divine righteousness is higher than man's standard can measure, or than man's slender wit can comprehend." In this fact, God will be glorified.

In a similar fashion, belief in God's predestinating activity should have salutary effects in a believer's life, according to Calvin. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of the Reformer's doctrine of predestination—he believes it should comfort believers rather than cause them to despair! Predestination is "very sweet fruit," he says. Have you heard double predestination presented in that way!? It's sweet to the Christian, because "we shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by

this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others."

Its sweetness, then, comes from seeing the completely gracious character of our salvation. If you want comfort, look to God's election. Look to it by asking if you have faith in Christ. If you trust in Christ, you can be assured of your election, because, says Calvin, "it is certain that faith is a singular pledge of the Father's love, reserved for the sons whom he has adopted." "No man," he says, "makes himself a sheep but is made one by heavenly grace."

According to Calvin, predestination is also "sweet fruit" because it leads a believer to have assurance of salvation, for the God who elected and granted faith to the Christian will sustain him throughout his life. As Calvin argues, "For those whom Christ has illumined with the knowledge of his name and has introduced into the bosom of his church, he is said to receive into his care and keeping. All whom he receives, the Father is said to have entrusted and committed to him to keep unto eternal life." Rather than asking if God's love for us will remain constant, believers may be convinced "that they are out of danger of falling away because the Son of God, asking that their godliness be kept constant, did not suffer a refusal. What did Christ wish to have us learn from this but to trust that we shall ever remain safe because we have been made his once for all?"

Another benefit of belief in this doctrine, according to Pastor Calvin, is that it teaches a believer humility. Several





times throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin notes that humility should be the defining mark of a Christian. For example, he quotes Augustine approvingly, who commented that “when a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, ‘Delivery’; what was the second rule, ‘Delivery’; what was the third rule, ‘Delivery’; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, ‘Humility.’” This should be a joy, not a cause of discomfort, for a Christian.

For one who knows he is saved only because of God’s grace, and who is resting in this salvation, humility can result without the fear that a Christian must just “maintain appearances.” The only thing that matters is God’s loving election. Thus, Calvin argues that nothing will suffice to make us humble as we ought to be [as the truth of election will], nor shall we otherwise sincerely feel how much we are obliged to God. And as Christ teaches, here is our only ground for firmness and confidence: “. . . he promises that whoever the Father has entrusted into his keeping will be safe. From this we infer that all those who do not know that they are God’s own will be miserable through constant fear.”

Predestination’s “intent is that, humbled and cast down, we may learn to tremble at his judgment and esteem his mercy. It is at this mark that believers aim.” When a Christian recognizes this, he can both think rightly about God’s glory and look honestly at himself.

#### *The Purpose of Prayer in the Christian’s Life*

As we move into a discussion of Calvin on prayer, we see him using the same rubric to direct his readers’ attention to the God-glorifying and soul-comforting aim of prayer. By way of introduction, we see Calvin’s pastoral motivation in that he includes a discussion of prayer in the *Institutes* at all. We might not expect to see that in a “dry theological tome.” But this is no academically oriented systematics; this is a pastoral treatise. Nor should we overlook the fact that Calvin’s chapter on prayer is the longest one in the *Institutes*! He obviously felt it was an important subject for his readers to know something about.

Why, though? What is a person’s motivation for prayer, according to Calvin? In order to introduce this subject, let me first give you a couple of quotes from Calvin that show the intensity with which he pressed on his readers their obligation to pray. Notice the affective language that he uses

## The only worth of our prayers, the only hope of their being answered, comes from God.

as he pleads with them to be ever more active in praying:

After we have been instructed by faith to recognize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him. Otherwise, to know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not go to him and not ask of him—this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him.

Similarly, Calvin notes,

It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father. For there is a communion of men with God by which, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, they appeal to him in person concerning his promises in order to experience, where necessity demands, that what they believed was not vain, although he had promised it in word alone. Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true it is that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.

If I had more space, I would have liked to address the topic of Calvin’s teaching on prayer, because I think it is *very* insightful and challenging for evangelicals who have more of a doctrinal orientation. It is so helpful to remember that this same man also espoused double predestination! If

you've never read the *Institutes* before, you can't do better than begin by reading Calvin on prayer.

Rather, I will address Calvin's pastoral vision regarding prayer. First of all, we see again that, for Calvin, one reason to pray was that it honored God as the sovereign Lord to whom His people looked for their every need. Prayer does not tell God anything He does not already know. Nor does it twist His arm to help us, as if He needed us to convince Him to be good to us! No, God is glorified as we pray to Him because in praying we acknowledge that He is the Sovereign with both the will and the power to help us.

We see this throughout Calvin's lengthy discussion. God is glorified, he says, when we pray because it reminds us of His sovereign providence in caring for us. In the act of prayer, "we give ourselves over to His care, and entrust ourselves to His providence, that He may feed, nourish, and preserve us." For this reason, then, we need to approach God reverently in prayer—in fact, Calvin labels this the first rule of prayer. We are not playing games but are coming to the King.

Thus, Calvin reminds us that "the only persons who duly and properly gird themselves to pray" are the ones who are "moved by God's majesty" when they come before him. Our support when we come to God in prayer is His promises, not our merit. Again, this brings glory to God, "inasmuch as our prayers depend upon no merit of ours, but their whole worth and hope of fulfillment are grounded in God's promises, and depend upon them."

The only worth of our prayers, the only hope of their being answered, comes from God. He receives the honor in this. So, Calvin reminds his readers that in prayer "we should wish God to have the honor he deserves; men should never speak or think of him without the highest reverence." As we remember to whom we pray, and why it is that we need to look outside of ourselves and come to him in the first place, God receives glory for being recognized by us as the Sovereign King.

But Calvin does not stop with that point. Scattered throughout his discussion of prayer is the second of his two emphases—Christians are comforted as we bring our concerns to God, whom we know can meet our needs. We already heard Calvin say, "It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father." Calvin stresses that our great comfort in prayer is that we come to God as our Father. Thus, he says, because we are certain of our adoption by God, "we embrace this great blessing with sure faith" and it plays itself out in our prayers. "By the sweetness of this name, [Father]," Calvin notes, "he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father. Therefore he could not attest his own bound-

less love toward us with any surer proof than that fact that we are called 'children of God.'"

It is for our comfort, then, that God adopts us as His children, and it is for our good that He grants us the privilege of prayer. In his comments on Jesus' first address in the Lord's Prayer, Calvin draws this striking conclusion:

To strengthen our assurance that he is this sort of father to us if we are Christians, he willed that we call him not only "Father" but explicitly "our Father." It is as if we addressed him: "O Father, who dost abound with great devotion toward thy children, and with great readiness to forgive, we thy children call upon thee and make our prayer, assured and clearly persuaded that thou bearest toward us only the affection of a father, although we are unworthy of such a father."

Thus, because of the great comfort that comes with praying, and as a means to further our communion with our Heavenly Father, Pastor Calvin urges his readers—and us—to pray. I conclude by noting once again Calvin's affectionate language when speaking about this chief exercise of faith. He warns his readers that "the godly must particularly beware of presenting themselves before God to request anything unless they yearn for it with sincere affection of heart, and at the same time desire to obtain it from him." Affectionately, then, with an eye towards our comfort, we should pray.

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to make two applications in light of what I have said. First of all, I would urge you to read Calvin's *Institutes*. It is one of the very few works from the sixteenth century that is still important for us to read, today. If your desire—as I hope it is—is to glorify God, find comfort in Christ, and arrive safely in heaven, after reading the Bible, I don't know that you can do yourself any more good than to spend time pondering, being affected by, and experiencing the wonder of God's sovereignty and goodness as presented in the *Institutes*. (Remember Calvin's three perspectives of viewing the complexities of humanity.)

Second, for those of you whom God has called to pastor Christ's church, I would urge you to evaluate Calvin's five-fold pastoral vision to see if it is biblical. If it is—and I am convinced it is—then seek to model your pastoral duties on its foundation. There is so much in our culture, in our churches, and in ourselves (!) that works against our seeking to pastor in a God-honoring fashion. If Calvin can help us to honor the Lord and bring comfort to God's people more, then by all means let us use and profit from him. ♦



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