

CALVIN'S EVANGELISM*

by Joel R. Beeke

MANY SCHOLARS WOULD take issue with the title of this article. Some would say that Roman Catholicism kept the evangelistic torch of Christianity lit via the powerful forces of the papacy, the monasteries, and the monarch while Calvin and the Reformers tried to extinguish it.¹ But others would assert that John Calvin (1509-1564), the father of Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine and theology, was largely responsible for relighting the torch of biblical evangelism during the Reformation.²

Some also credit Calvin with being a theological father of the Reformed missionary movement.³ Views of Calvin's attitude toward evangelism and missions have ranged from hearty to moderate support on the positive side,⁴ and from indifference to active opposition on the negative side.⁵

*This article was first given as an address at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on November 11, 2003.

¹William Richey Hogg, "The Rise of Protestant Missionary Concern, 1517-1914," in *Theology of Christian Mission*, ed. G. Anderson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 96-97.

²David B. Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure?," *Presbyterian* 5/1 (Spr 1979): 16-33—to which I am greatly indebted in the first part of this article; W. Stanford Reid, "Calvin's Geneva: A Missionary Centre," *Reformed Theological Review* 42/3 (1983): 65-74.

³Samuel M. Zwemer, "Calvinism and the Missionary Enterprise," *Theology Today* 7/2 (July 1950): 206-216; J. Douglas MacMillan, "Calvin, Geneva, and Christian Mission," *Reformed Theological Journal* 5 (Nov 1989): 5-17.

⁴Johannes van den Berg, "Calvin's Missionary Message," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 22 (1950): 174-87; Walter Holsten, "Reformation und Mission," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 44,1 (1953): 1-32; Charles E. Edwards, "Calvin and Missions," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 39 (1967): 47-51;

A negative view of Calvin's evangelism is a result of:

- ♦ A failure to study Calvin's writings prior to drawing their conclusions,
- ♦ A failure to understand Calvin's view of evangelism within his own historical context,
- ♦ Preconceived doctrinal notions about Calvin and his theology to their study. Some critics naively assert that Calvin's doctrine of election virtually negates evangelism.

To assess Calvin's view of evangelism correctly, we must understand what Calvin himself had to say on the subject. Second, we must look at the entire scope of Calvin's evangelism, both in his teaching and his practice. We can find scores of references to evangelism in Calvin's *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, and letters. Then we can look at Calvin's evangelistic work (1) in his own flock, (2) in his home city of Geneva, (3) in greater Europe, and (4) in mission opportunities overseas. As we shall see, Calvin was more of an evangelist than is commonly recognized.

Calvin: Teacher of Evangelism

How was Calvin's teaching evangelistic? In what way did his instruction oblige believers to seek the conversion of all people, those within the church as well as those in the world outside it?

Along with other Reformers, Calvin taught evangelism in a general way by earnestly proclaiming the gospel and by reforming the church according to biblical requirements. More specifically, Calvin taught evangelism by focusing on the universality of Christ's kingdom and the responsibility of Christians to help extend that kingdom.

The universality of Christ's kingdom is an oft-repeated theme in Calvin's teaching.⁶ Calvin says all three persons of the Trinity are

Charles Chaney, "The Missionary Dynamic in the Theology of John Calvin," *Reformed Review* 17,3 (Mar 1964): 24-38.

⁵Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions* (London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1906), 19-20.

⁶John Calvin, *Commentaries of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950ff.), on Psalm 2:8, 110:2, Matt. 6:10, 12:31, John 13:31. (Hereafter the format, *Commentary* on Psalm 2:8, will be used.)

involved in the spreading of the kingdom. The Father will show “not only in one corner, what true religion is . . . but he will send forth his voice to the extreme limits of the earth.”⁷ Jesus came “to extend his grace over all the world.”⁸ And the Holy Spirit descended to “reach all the ends and extremities of the world.”⁹ In short, innumerable offspring “who shall be spread over the whole earth” will be born to Christ.¹⁰ And the triumph of Christ’s kingdom will become manifest everywhere among the nations.¹¹

How will the triune God extend his kingdom throughout the world? Calvin’s answer involves both God’s sovereignty and our responsibility. He says the work of evangelism is God’s work, not ours, but God will use us as his instruments. Citing the parable of the sower, Calvin explains that Christ sows the seed of life everywhere (Matt. 13:24-30), gathering his church not by human means but by heavenly power.¹² The gospel “does not fall from the clouds like rain,” however, but is “brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it.”¹³ Jesus teaches us that God “uses our work and summons us to be his instruments in cultivating his field.”¹⁴ The power to save rests with God, but he reveals his salvation through the preaching of the gospel.¹⁵ God’s evangelism causes our evangelism.¹⁶ We are his co-workers, and he allows us to participate in “the honor of constituting his own Son governor over the whole world.”¹⁷

Calvin taught that the ordinary method of “collecting a church” is by the outward voice of men; “for though God might bring each

⁷*Commentary* on Micah 4:3.

⁸John Calvin, *Sermons of M. John Calvin on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothy and Titus*, trans. L. T. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust reprint, 1983), sermon on 1 Timothy 2:5-6, pp. 161-72.

⁹*Commentary* on Acts 2:1-4.

¹⁰*Commentary* on Psalm 110:3.

¹¹T. F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 161.

¹²*Commentary* on Matthew 24:30.

¹³*Commentary* on Romans 10:15.

¹⁴*Commentary* on Matthew 13:24-30.

¹⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book 4, chapter 1, section 5. (Hereafter the format, *Institutes* 4.1.5, will be used.)

¹⁶*Commentary* on Romans 10:14-17.

¹⁷*Commentary* on Psalm 2:8.

person to himself by a secret influence, yet he employs the agency of men, that he may awaken in them an anxiety about the salvation of each other.”¹⁸ He goes so far as to say, “Nothing retards so much the progress of Christ’s kingdom as the paucity of ministers.”¹⁹ Still, no human effort has the final word. It is the Lord, says Calvin, who “causes the voice of the gospel to resound not only in one place, but far and wide through the whole world.”²⁰ The gospel is not preached at random to all nations but by the decree of God.²¹

According to Calvin, this joining together of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in evangelism offers the following lessons:

1. As Reformed evangelists, we must pray daily for the extension of Christ’s kingdom. As Calvin says, “We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth.”²² Since it pleases God to use our prayers to accomplish his purposes, we must pray for the conversion of the heathen.²³ Calvin writes, “It ought to be the great object of our daily wishes, that God would collect churches for himself from all the countries of the earth, that he would enlarge their numbers, enrich them with gifts, and establish a legitimate order among them.”²⁴ By daily prayer for God’s kingdom to come, we “profess ourselves servants and children of God deeply committed to his reputation.”²⁵
2. We must not become discouraged at a lack of visible success in evangelistic effort, but pray on. “Our Lord exercises the faith of his children, in that he doth not out of hand perform the things which he had promised them. And this thing ought specially to be applied to the reign of our

¹⁸*Commentary* on Isaiah 2:3.

¹⁹Jules Bonnet, ed., *Letters of Calvin*, trans. David Constable and Marcus Robert Gilchrist, 4 vols. (New York, reprint), 4:263.

²⁰*Commentary* on Isaiah 49:2.

²¹*Commentary* on Isaiah 45:22.

²²*Institutes* 3.20.42.

²³*Sermons of Master John Calvin upon the Fiftbe Book of Moses called Deuteronomie*, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust reprint, 1987), sermon on Deuteronomy 33:18-19. (Hereafter *Sermon on Deuteronomy* 33:18-19.)

²⁴*Institutes* 3.20.42.

²⁵*Institutes* 3.20.43.

Lord Jesus Christ,” Calvin writes. “If God pass over a day or a year [without giving fruit], it is not for us to give over, but we must in the meanwhile pray and not doubt but that he heareth our voice.”²⁶ We must keep praying, believing that “Christ shall manifestly exercise the power given to him for our salvation and for that of the whole world.”²⁷

3. We must work diligently for the extension of Christ’s kingdom, knowing that our work will not be in vain. Our salvation obligates us to work for the salvation of others. Calvin says, “We are called by the Lord on this condition, that everyone should afterwards strive to lead others to the truth, to restore the wandering to the right way, to extend a helping hand to the fallen, to win over those that are without.”²⁸ Moreover, it is not enough for every man to be busy with other ways of serving God. “Our zeal must extend yet further to the drawing of other men.” We must do everything we are capable of to draw all men on earth to God.²⁹

There are many reasons why we must evangelize. Calvin offers the following:

- ♦ God commands us to do so. “We should remember that the gospel is preached not only by the command of Christ but at his urging and leading.”³⁰
- ♦ God leads us by example. Like our gracious God who wooed us, we must have our “arms extended, as he has, toward those outside” of us.³¹
- ♦ We want to glorify God. True Christians yearn to extend God’s truth everywhere that “God may be glorified.”³²
- ♦ We want to please God. As Calvin writes, “It is a sacrifice well-pleasing to God to advance the spread of the

²⁶*Sermon on Deuteronomy* 33:7-8.

²⁷*Commentary on Micah* 7:10-14.

²⁸*Commentary on Hebrews* 10:24.

²⁹*Sermon on Deuteronomy* 33:18-19.

³⁰*Commentary on Matthew* 13:24-20.

³¹John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), sermon on Ephesians 4:15-16.

³²Bonnet, *Letters of Calvin*, 4:169.

gospel.”³³ To five students who were sentenced to death for preaching in France, Calvin wrote, “Seeing that [God] employs your life in so worthy a cause as is the witness of the gospel, doubt not that it must be precious to him.”³⁴

- ♦ We have a duty to God. “It is very just that we should labor . . . to further the progress of the gospel,” says Calvin;³⁵ “it is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation.”³⁶
- ♦ We have a duty to our fellow sinners. Our compassion for sinners should be intensified by our knowledge that “God cannot be sincerely called upon by others than those to whom, through the preaching of the gospel, his kindness and gentle dealings have become known.”³⁷ Consequently, every encounter with other human beings should motivate us to bring them to the knowledge of God.³⁸
- ♦ We are grateful to God. Those who are indebted to God’s mercy are bound to become, like the psalmist, “the loud herald of the grace of God” to all men.³⁹ If salvation is possible for me, a great sinner, then it is possible for others. I owe it to God to strive for the salvation of others; if I do not, I am a contradiction. As Calvin says, “Nothing could be more inconsistent concerning the nature of faith than that deadness which would lead a man to disregard his brethren, and to keep the light of knowledge . . . in his own breast.”⁴⁰ We must, out of gratitude, bring the gospel to others in distress, or appear ungrateful to God for our own salvation.⁴¹

Calvin never assumed that the missionary task was completed by the apostles. Instead, he taught that every Christian must testify by word and deed of God’s grace to everyone he or she meets.⁴²

³³Bonnet, *Letters of Calvin*, 2:453.

³⁴Bonnet, *Letters of Calvin*, 2:407.

³⁵Bonnet, *Letters of Calvin*, 2:453.

³⁶*Commentary* on Isaiah 12:5.

³⁷*Institutes* 3.20.11.

³⁸*Sermon on Deuteronomy* 33:18-19.

³⁹*Commentary* on Psalm 51:16.

⁴⁰*Commentary* on Isaiah 2:3.

⁴¹*Sermon on Deuteronomy* 24:10-13.

⁴²*Institutes* 4.20.4.

Calvin's affirmation of the priesthood of all believers involves the church's participation in Christ's prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministry. It commissions believers to confess Christ's name to others (prophetic task), to pray for their salvation (priestly task), and to disciple them (kingly task). It is the basis for powerful evangelistic activity on the part of the entire living church "to the world's end."⁴³

Calvin: Practitioner of Evangelism

Calvin believed we must make full use of the opportunities God gives to evangelize. "When an opportunity for edification presents itself, we should realize that a door has been opened for us by the hand of God in order that we may introduce Christ into that place and we should not refuse to accept the generous invitation that God thus gives us," he writes.⁴⁴

On the other hand, when opportunities are restricted and doors of evangelism are closed to our witness, we should not persist in trying to do what cannot be done. Rather, we should pray and seek for other opportunities. "The door is shut when there is no hope of success. [Then] we have to go a different way rather than wear ourselves out in vain efforts to get through it," Calvin writes.⁴⁵

Difficulties in witnessing are not an excuse to stop trying, however. To those suffering severe restrictions and persecutions in France, Calvin wrote: "Let every one strive to attract and win over to Jesus Christ those whom he can."⁴⁶ "Each man must perform his duty without yielding to any impediment. At the end our effort and our labors shall not fail; they shall receive the success which does not yet appear."⁴⁷

Let's examine Calvin's practice of evangelism in his own congregation, in his home city of Geneva, in Europe (particularly France), and in missionary efforts overseas (particularly Brazil).

Evangelism in the Congregation

⁴³*Sermon on Deuteronomy* 18:9-15.

⁴⁴*Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 2:12.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Bonnet, *Letters of Calvin*, 3:134.

⁴⁷*Commentary* on Genesis 17:23.

Too often we think of evangelism today only as the Spirit's regenerating work and the sinner's consequent receiving of Christ by faith. In this, we reject Calvin's emphasis on conversion as a continuous process involving the whole person.

For Calvin, evangelism involved a continual, authoritative call to the believer to exercise faith and repentance in the crucified and risen Christ. This summons is a whole-life commitment. Evangelism means presenting Christ so that people, by the power of the Spirit, may come to God in Christ. But it also means presenting Christ so that the believer may serve Christ as Lord in the fellowship of his church and in the world. Evangelism demands building up believers in the most holy faith according to the five key tenets of the Reformation: Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, the glory of God alone.

Calvin was an outstanding practitioner of this kind of evangelism within his own congregation. For Calvin, evangelism began with preaching. As William Bouwsma writes, "He preached regularly and often: on the Old Testament on weekdays at six in the morning (seven in winter), every other week; on the New Testament on Sunday mornings; and on the Psalms on Sunday afternoons. During his lifetime he preached, on this schedule, some 4,000 sermons after his return to Geneva: more than 170 sermons a year." Preaching was so important to Calvin that when he was reviewing the accomplishments of his lifetime on his deathbed, he mentioned his sermons ahead of his writings.⁴⁸

Calvin's intent in preaching was to evangelize as well as edify. On average, he would preach on four or five verses in the Old Testament and two or three verses in the New Testament. He would consider a small portion of the text at a time, first explaining the text, then applying it to the lives of his congregation. Calvin's sermons were never short on application; rather, the application was often longer than the exposition in his sermons. Preachers must be like fathers, he wrote, "dividing bread into small pieces to feed their children."

He was also succinct. As Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, said of the Reformer's preaching, "Every word weighed a pound."

Calvin frequently instructed his congregation on how to listen to a sermon. He told them what to look for in preaching, in what

⁴⁸William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 29.

spirit they should listen, and how they should listen. His goal was to help people participate in the sermon as much as they could so that it would feed their souls. Coming to a sermon, Calvin said, should include “willingness to obey God completely and with no reserve.”⁴⁹ “We have not come to the preaching merely to hear what we do not know,” Calvin added, “but to be incited to do our duty.”⁵⁰

Calvin also reached out to unsaved people through his preaching, impressing them with the necessity of faith in Christ and what that meant. Calvin made it clear that he did not believe everyone in his flock was saved. Though charitable toward church members who maintained a commendable, outward lifestyle, he also referred more than thirty times in his commentaries and nine times in his *Institutes* (only counting references within 3.21 to 3.24) to the small numbers of those who receive the preached Word with saving faith. “If the same sermon is preached, say, to a hundred people, twenty receive it with the ready obedience of faith, while the rest hold it valueless, or laugh, or hiss, or loathe it,” Calvin says.⁵¹ He writes, “For though all, without exception, to whom God’s Word is preached, are taught, yet scarce one in ten so much as tastes it; yea, scarce one in a hundred profits to the extent of being enabled, thereby, to proceed in a right course to the end.”⁵²

For Calvin, the most important tasks of evangelism were building up the children of God in the most holy faith, and convicting unbelievers of the heinousness of sin and directing them to Christ Jesus as the only Redeemer.

Evangelism in Geneva

Calvin did not confine preaching to his own congregation. He also used it as a tool to spread the Reformation throughout the city of Geneva. On Sundays, the Genevan Ordinances required sermons in each of the three churches at daybreak and 9 a.m. At noon,

⁴⁹Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin, Expository Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 65.

⁵⁰John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, in *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1895), 79:783.

⁵¹*Institutes* 3.24.12.

⁵²*Commentary* on Psalm 119:101.

children went to catechism classes. At 3 p.m., sermons were preached again in each church.

Weekday sermons were scheduled at various times in the three churches on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. By the time Calvin died, a sermon was preached in every church each day of the week.

Even that wasn't enough. Calvin wanted to reform Genevans in all spheres of life. In his ecclesiastical ordinances he required three additional functions besides preaching that each church should offer:

1. Teaching. Doctors of theology should explain the Word of God, first in informal lectures, then in the more formal setting of the Geneva Academy, established in 1559. By the time Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, retired, the Geneva Academy had trained 1,600 men for the ministry.
2. Discipline. Elders appointed within each congregation were, with the assistance of the pastors, to maintain Christian discipline, watching over the conduct of church members and their leaders.
3. Charity. Deacons in each church were to receive contributions and distribute them to the poor.

Initially, Calvin's reforms met stiff local opposition. People particularly objected to the church's use of excommunication to enforce church discipline. After months of bitter controversy, the local citizens and religious refugees who supported Calvin won control of the city. For the last nine years of his life, Calvin's control over Geneva was nearly complete.

Calvin wanted to do more than reform Geneva, however; he wanted the city to become a kind of model for Christ's reign throughout the world. Indeed, the reputation and influence of the Genevan community spread to neighboring France, then to Scotland, England, the Netherlands, parts of western Germany, and sections of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. The Genevan church became a model for the entire Reformed movement.

The Geneva Academy also assumed a critically important role as it quickly became more than a place to learn theology. In "John Calvin: Director of Missions," Philip Hughes writes:

Calvin's Geneva was something very much more than a haven and a school. It was not a theological ivory tower that lived to itself and for itself, oblivious to its responsibility in the gospel to the needs of

others. Human vessels were equipped and refitted in this haven . . . that they might launch out into the surrounding ocean of the world's need, bravely facing every storm and peril that awaited them in order to bring the light of Christ's gospel to those who were in the ignorance and darkness from which they themselves had originally come. They were taught in this school in order that they in turn might teach others the truth that had set them free.⁵³

Influenced by the Academy, John Knox took the evangelical doctrine back to his native Scotland. Englishmen were equipped to lead the cause in England; Italians had what they needed to teach in Italy; and Frenchmen (who formed the great bulk of refugees) spread Calvinism to France. Inspired by Calvin's truly ecumenical vision, Geneva became a nucleus from which evangelism spread throughout the world. According to the Register of the Company of Pastors, eighty-eight men were sent out between 1555 and 1562 from Geneva to different places in the world. These figures are woefully incomplete. In 1561, which appears to have been the peak year for missionary activity, the dispatch of only twelve men is recorded, whereas other sources indicate that nearly twelve times that number—no less than 142—went forth on respective missions.⁵⁴

That is an amazing accomplishment for an effort that began with a small church struggling within a tiny city-republic. Yet Calvin himself recognized the strategic value of the effort. He wrote to Bullinger, "When I consider how very important this corner [of Geneva] is for the propagation of the kingdom of Christ, I have good reason to be anxious that it should be carefully watched over."⁵⁵

In a sermon on 1 Timothy 3:14, Calvin preached, "May we attend to what God has enjoined upon us, that he would be pleased to show his grace, not only to one city or a little handful of people, but that he would reign over all the world; that everyone may serve and worship him in truth."

Evangelistic Efforts in France

⁵³Philip Hughes, *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 44.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 45-46.

⁵⁵Bonnet, *Letters of Calvin*, 2:227.

To understand how Calvin promoted the Reformation throughout Europe, we need to look at what he did in France.

France was only partially open to Reformed evangelism. Religious and political hostilities, which also threatened Geneva, were a constant danger in France. Nonetheless, Calvin and his colleagues made the most of the small opening they had. The minutes of the Company of Pastors in Geneva deal with the supervision of the missionary efforts in France more than in any other country.⁵⁶

Here's how it worked. Reformed believers from France took refuge in Geneva. While there, many began to study theology. They then felt compelled to return to their own people as Reformed evangelists and pastors. After passing a rigorous theological examination, each was given an assignment by the Genevan Company of Pastors, usually in response to a formal request from a French church needing a pastor. In most cases, the receiving church was fighting for its life under persecution.

The French refugees who returned as pastors were eventually killed, but their zeal encouraged the hopes of their parishioners. Their mission, which, according to the pastors, sought "to advance the knowledge of the gospel in France, as our Lord commands," was successful. Reformed evangelistic preaching produced a remarkable revival. In 1555, there was only one fully organized Reformed church in France. Seven years later, there were close to two thousand.

The French Reformed pastors were on fire for God and, despite massive persecution, God used their work to convert thousands. This is one of the most remarkable examples of effective home missions work in the history of Protestantism, and one of the most astonishing revivals in church history.

Some of the French Reformed congregations became very large. For example, Pierre Viret pastored a church of 8,000 communicants in Nimes. More than 10 percent of the French population in the 1560s—as many as three million—belonged to these churches.

During the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572, 70,000 Protestants were killed. Nevertheless, the church continued. Persecution eventually drove out many of the French Protestants,

⁵⁶Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 31.

known as the Huguenots. They left France for many different nations, enriching the Church wherever they went.

Not all of the refugee pastors were sent to French churches. Some went to Northern Italy, others to Antwerp, London, and other cities in Europe. Some even went beyond Europe to far-off Brazil. Regardless of where they went, their preaching was strong and powerful, and God blessed their efforts.

Evangelism in Brazil

Calvin knew there were nations and people who had not yet heard the gospel and he keenly felt the burden. Though there is no record that he ever came into contact with the newly discovered world of Asian and African paganism, Calvin was involved with the Indians of South America through the Genevan mission to Brazil.

With the help of a Huguenot sympathizer, Gaspard de Coligny, and the support of Henry II, Nicolas Durand (also called Villegagnon) led an expedition to Brazil in 1555 to establish a colony there. The colonists included former prisoners, some of whom were Huguenots. When trouble erupted in the new colony near Rio de Janeiro, Villegagnon turned to the Huguenots in France, asking for better settlers. He appealed to Coligny as well as to Calvin and the church in Geneva. That letter was not preserved and there is only a brief summary in the account of the Company of Pastors of what happened.

Nonetheless, we have some insight into those events because of what Jean de Lery, a shoemaker and student of theology in Geneva who was soon to join the Brazilian colony, recorded in his personal journal. He wrote, "The letter asked that the church of Geneva send Villegagnon immediately ministers of the Word of God and with them numerous other persons 'well instructed in the Christian religion' in order better to reform him and his people and 'to bring the savages to the knowledge of their salvation.'"⁵⁷ Responsibility for evangelism to the heathen was thus laid squarely at the feet of the church of Geneva.

The church's reaction, according to Jean de Lery, was this: "Upon receiving these letters and hearing this news, the church of Geneva at once gave thanks to God for the extension of the reign

⁵⁷R. Pierce Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt, p. 61.

of Jesus Christ in a country so distant and likewise so foreign and among a nation entirely without knowledge of the true God.”⁵⁸

The Company of Pastors chose two ministers to send to Brazil. The Register succinctly notes: “On Tuesday 25 August [1556], in consequence of the receipt of a letter requesting this church to send ministers to the new islands [Brazil], which the French had conquered, M. Pierre Richier and M. Guillaume Charretier were elected. These two were subsequently commended to the care of the Lord and sent off with a letter from this church.”⁵⁹ Eleven laymen were also recruited for the colony, including Jean de Lery.

Although Calvin was not in Geneva at this time, he was kept informed of what was happening and offered his advice in letters that were sent on to Villegagnon.

The work with Indians in Brazil did not go well. Pastor Richier wrote to Calvin in April 1557 that the savages were incredibly barbaric. “The result is we are frustrated in our hope of revealing Christ to them,” he said.⁶⁰ Richier did not want to abandon the mission, however. He told Calvin that the missionaries would advance the work in stages and wait patiently for the six young boys who were placed with the Indians (the Tupinambas) to learn their language. “Since the Most High has given us this task, we expect this Edom to become a future possession for Christ,” he added confidently. Meanwhile, he trusted that the witness of pious and industrious members of the Reformed Church in the colony would influence the Indians.

Richier was a striking witness of Calvin’s missionary emphasis in four ways: (1) obedience to God in doing what is possible in a difficult situation, (2) trust in God to create opportunities for further witness, (3) insistence on the importance of the lives and actions of Christians as a means of witness, and (4) confidence that God will advance his kingdom.

The rest of the story is tragic. Villegagnon became disenchanted with Calvin and the Reformers. On February 9, 1558, just outside of Rio de Janeiro, he strangled three Calvinists and threw them into the sea. Believers fled for their lives. Later, the Portuguese attacked and destroyed the remainder of the settlement.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Philip E. Hughes, ed. and trans., *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 317.

⁶⁰Beaver, “The Genevan Mission to Brazil,” 62.

Thus ended the mission to the Indians. There is no record of any Indian converts. But was that the true end of the story? When an account of the martyrs of Rio de Janeiro was published six years later, it began with these words: “A barbarous land, utterly astonished at seeing the martyrs of our Lord Jesus Christ die, will some day produce the fruits that such precious blood has been at all times wont to produce.”⁶¹ Or, as Tertullian once wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Today, the Reformed faith is growing in Brazil among conservative Presbyterians through Reformed preaching, the Puritan Project, and various ministries that reprint Reformed and Puritan titles in Portuguese.

It is clear that Calvin was interested in spreading the gospel overseas, but that interest was limited by the following realities of the sixteenth century:

1. Time constraints. The Reformation was still so new in Calvin's time that he needed to concentrate on building up the truth in the churches. A mission church that is not built on foundational truth is not equipped to carry its message to foreign lands.
2. Work at home. Those who critique Calvin, saying his evangelistic efforts failed to extend to the foreign mission field, are quite unfair. After all, did not Christ command his disciples to begin spreading the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea (home missions) and then move on to Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth (foreign missions)? Obviously, the established church should be involved in both home and foreign missions, but we err when we judge one more important than the other. A genuine spirit of evangelism sees need everywhere. It does not fall prey to the worldly spirit that “The farther from home, the better.”
3. Government restrictions. Overseas mission work for the Reformers was virtually impossible because most of the governments in Europe were controlled by Roman Catholic princes, kings, and emperors. Persecution of Protestants was widespread. As Calvin wrote, “Today, when God wishes his gospel to be preached in the whole world, so that the world may be restored from death to life,

⁶¹G. Baez-Camargo, “The Earliest Protestant Missionary Venture in Latin America,” *Church History* 21, 2 (June 1952):144.

he seems to ask for the impossible. We see how greatly we are resisted everywhere and with how many and what potent machinations Satan works against us, so that all roads are blocked by the princes themselves.”⁶²

Nearly every door to the heathen world was closed for Calvin and his fellow Reformers. The world of Islam to the south and east was guarded by Turkish armies, while the navies of Spain and Portugal prevented access to the recently discovered new world. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI gave the Spanish and Portuguese rulers exclusive rights to these areas, which were reaffirmed by popes and treaties that followed.

Going out into the world for Calvin and other Reformers didn't necessarily mean leaving Europe. The mission field of unbelief was right within the realm of Christendom. For the Genevan church, France and Europe were open. Strengthened by Calvin's evangelistic theology, believers zealously responded to the mission call.

Calvin did what he could to support evangelism on the foreign front. Despite its tragic failure, the pioneer Protestant project off the coast of Brazil from 1550-1560 evoked Calvin's wholehearted sympathy, interest, and continued correspondence.⁶³

Calvin's Missionary Spirit and Election

Though Calvin's specific writings on missiology are limited, his *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, letters, and life glow with a missionary spirit. It is abundantly clear that John Calvin had a heart for evangelism to extend the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. It was Calvin's wish that "the kingdom of Christ should flourish everywhere." Establishing the heavenly reign of God upon earth was so important, Calvin said, that it "ought not only to occupy the chief place among our cares, but even absorb all our thoughts."⁶⁴

All of this should dispel the myth that Calvin and his followers promoted inactivity and disinterest in evangelism. Rather, the truths of sovereign grace taught by Calvin such as election are precisely the doctrines that encourage missionary activity. Where biblical,

⁶²*Commentary* on Genesis 17:23.

⁶³Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," 55-73.

⁶⁴Bonnet, *Letters of Calvin*, 2:134-35.

Reformed truth is loved, appreciated, and rightly taught, evangelism and mission activity abounds.

Election encourages evangelistic activity, for God sovereignly links election with the means of grace (Acts 13:44-49). Election evokes mission activity characterized by a humble dependence on God for blessing. The doctrine of free grace is not a barrier to God-centered, God-glorifying evangelism; it is a barrier against a humanistic concept of evangelistic task and methods.⁶⁵

Calvin never allowed election to limit the free offer of the gospel. He taught that since no one knows who are elect, preachers must operate on the principle that God wills all to be saved.⁶⁶ Election undergirds rather than limits evangelism. Election belongs to the special category of God's secret purposes, not to the evangelistic activity of the church. Consequently, the gospel must be preached to every sinner; the sinner's believing response to the free offer of salvation in Christ reveals whether or not he is elect. For though the gospel call comes to all who hear the Word, that call is only made effectual by the Holy Spirit in the elect.⁶⁷ God opens doors for the church that the gospel may go into all the world, and his elect will hear it and respond in faith.⁶⁸

Election thus is the impetus and guarantor of the success of Reformed evangelism. As Isaiah 55:11 says, "My word . . . that goeth forth out of my mouth...shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

Is it any wonder, then, that Calvin called election the church's heart, hope, and comfort? Totally depraved creatures such as you and I may hope in an electing God.

A Word of Encouragement

Calvin has been criticized for his supposed failure to support evangelistic efforts. We have seen that this is simply not so, and the lessons ought to give us encouragement.

For one, it tells us we ought to stay on task and worry less about what others say of us. If Calvin could not shield himself from

⁶⁵Van den Berg, "Calvin's Missionary Message," 179.

⁶⁶*Institutes* 3.24.16-17.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸*Institutes* 3.21.7.

critics even when he worked twenty hours a day, preaching, teaching, and writing, what does that say about our work for God's kingdom? If Calvin was not evangelistic, who is? Are we willing to confess with William Carey as we labor for the souls of sinners, "I had rather wear out than rust out"?

Perhaps some of us are tired. We fear we are wearing out without seeing fruit from our evangelistic efforts. We are burdened with work. Spiritual labor has produced spiritual weariness, which in turn has produced spiritual discouragement. Our eye has not dimmed, but our physical and spiritual energy has been seriously depleted by the constant giving of ourselves for the good of others.

That may be particularly true for those of us who are pastors. On Saturday evenings we are anxious because we do not feel adequately prepared for worship; our responsibilities have been too heavy. We have been overwhelmed with church administration, personal counseling, and correspondence. By Sunday evening we are completely drained. Unable to sustain our responsibilities, we labor under a continual sense of inadequacy. We lack family time; we lack private time with God. Like Moses, our hands grow heavy in intercession. Like Paul, we cry out, "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). The routines of daily ministry become overwhelming; we experience what Spurgeon called "the minister's fainting fits," and we wonder if we are being used by God after all. Our vision of ministry is sadly diminished.

In such times, we should follow Calvin's example. Some lessons from him include:

- ♦ Look more to Christ. Rest more in his perseverance, for your perseverance rests in his. Seek grace to imitate his patience under affliction. Your trials may alarm you, but they will not destroy you. Your crosses are God's way to royal crowning (Rev. 7:14).
- ♦ Take the long view. Seek to live in light of eternity. The Chinese bamboo tree appears to do absolutely nothing for four years. Then, during its fifth year, it suddenly shoots up ninety feet in sixty days. Would you say that this tree grew in six weeks or in five years? If you follow the Lord in obedience, you will generally see your efforts rewarded eventually. Remember, however, that God never asked you to produce growth; he only asks you to continue working.

- ♦ Realize that times of discouragement are often followed by times of revival. While we predict the church's ruin, God is preparing for her renewal. The church will survive through all time and come to glory while the ungodly will come to ruin. So gird up the loins of your mind and stand fast, for the Lord is greater than both Apollyon and the times. Look to God, not man, for the church belongs to God.
- ♦ Rely on God. Though friends may fail you, God will not. The Father is worthy. Christ is worthy. The Holy Spirit is worthy. Seeing that you have a great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God, who rules from the heavens, draw near to him in faith, and wait upon him, and he will renew your strength. We are not all Calvins. Actually, none of us can be Calvins. But we can keep working by God's grace, looking to Jesus for daily strength. If Calvin, one man, did so much good for the cause of evangelism, shouldn't we ask God to also use our efforts, making them fruitful by his blessing?

Heed the advice of the Puritan, John Flavel, who wrote, "Bury not the church before she be dead." Pray more and look at circumstances less. Continue with double earnestness to serve the Lord when no visible result is before you. Endure hardship as good soldiers of Christ. Be willing to be counted fools for Christ's sake. Be sure that you are in God, for you may then be sure that God is in you.

In M'Cheyne's words, "Let your life speak even louder than your sermons. Let your life be the life of your ministry." Be exemplary on and off the pulpit, and leave the fruits of your ministry to our sovereign God who makes no mistakes and who never forsakes the work of his hands.

Finally, take heart from Calvin's approach to "the open door." Do we not err in spending our energies trying to pry open doors that God has closed? Shouldn't we rather pray more for new doors to open for our ministries? Shouldn't we ask for God's guidance in recognizing which doors are open and for his strength to walk through them? May God give us grace not to lead him but rather to follow him in all our evangelistic efforts. Isn't the very heartbeat of Reformed evangelism to follow God rather than try to lead him?

May the Lord Jesus be able to say of us what he said to the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:8, "I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut

it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.”

That is what Calvin’s Reformed evangelism is all about, and that is what our evangelism must be all about. May God help us to be true to his Name, to be obedient to his Word, to look for the doors he will open before us, and to pray with Calvin: “May we daily solicit thee in our prayers, and never doubt, but that under the government of thy Christ, thou canst again gather together the whole world . . . when Christ shall exercise the power given to him for our salvation and for that of the whole world.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹Cited in J. Graham Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 221.