



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

The Expository Genius of

John Calvin

S T E V E N J . L A W S O N

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The Expository Genius of John Calvin

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Standing on Holy Ground

To step into the pulpit is to enter onto holy ground. To stand behind an open Bible demands no trifling with sacred things. To be a spokesman for God requires utmost concern and care in handling and proclaiming the Word. Rightly does Scripture warn, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1).

But sad to say, we live in a generation that has compromised this sacred calling to preach. Exposition is being replaced with entertainment, preaching with performances, doctrine with drama, and theology with theatrics. Desperately does the modern-day church need to recover its way and return to a pulpit that is Bible-based, Christ-centered, and life-changing. God has always been pleased to honor His Word—especially His Word *preached*. The greatest seasons

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of church history—those eras of widespread reformation and great awakening—have been those epochs in which God-fearing men took the inspired Word and unashamedly preached it in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the pulpit goes, so goes the church. Thus, only a reformed pulpit will ultimately lead to a reformed church. In this hour, pastors must see their pulpits again marked by sequential exposition, doctrinal clarity, and a sense of gravity regarding eternal matters. This, in my estimation, is *the need of the hour*.

This book is the first of a series that will examine the varied ministries of noted men from church history. Given the pressing need in our time for powerful pulpits, preachers will be a key focus. The reason for this emphasis is simple—I can think of no better discipline for preachers today, apart from the study of Scripture itself, than to examine the biblical exposition of spiritual giants from the past.

To that end, this book will investigate the preaching of the great Reformer of Geneva, John Calvin. Future books in this series will delve into the ministries of other gifted preachers, such as Martin Luther, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and others. These mighty men were used by God to reform the church, confront the world, and alter the flow of history. At the very epicenters of these extraordinary ministries were pulpits that were anchored to the Word. In a very real sense, these pulpits were the hinges upon which history turned.

As we look back upon those men and the momentous

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times in which they lived, certain questions must be raised: What marked the preaching of these influential men? What were their commitments in the public proclamation of the Word? The approaches these men took to the pulpit must receive our closest attention if we are to see another great movement of God in our day.

As we consider Calvin’s life and work, we will survey the distinguishing marks of his pulpit ministry, consider the core presuppositions that undergirded his biblical preaching, and examine his personal preparation for the pulpit. Along the way, we will gain an overview of his preaching itself—his sermon introduction, interpretation, application, conclusion, and final intercession. In short, we will explore the distinguishing marks of Calvin’s expository genius.

The goal here is not to take a sentimental journey—the hour is too desperate for such a triviality. Rather, the aim of this book is to raise the bar for a new generation of expositors. The method is to see what a commitment to biblical preaching looks like by examining the work of a man who was sold out to this sacred duty.

If you are a preacher or teacher, may you be challenged to a higher standard in your handling of the Word. If you are a supporter of one called to this ministry, may you know how best to pray. May all who read these chapters find them impactful and inspirational, mighty and motivational—all for the ushering in of a new reformation.

I want to express my gratitude to the team at Ligonier

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Ministries for their keen interest and involvement in this project. Tim Dick, president and chief executive of Ligonier, first saw the value in this book being placed in your hands. Greg Bailey, director of publications for Ligonier's Reformation Trust Publishing division, did a masterful job of fine-tuning my work, and Creative Director Chris Larson added his talented touch to the graphic design.

At Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, I want to thank the elders, pastors, and congregation, who urged me to pursue God's will in writing this book. I also want to thank my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document and coordinated the efforts, and Keith Phillips and Mark Hassler, who provided invaluable help in researching and working with the manuscript.

At home, my wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, have only encouraged me in my writing assignments. May all who read this book know the loving home environment in which I study and write.

Soli Deo Gloria.

—Steven J. Lawson
Mobile, Alabama
September 2006

Approaching the Pulpit

Calvin was no Genevan dictator, ruling the population with a rod of iron. He was not even a citizen of Geneva throughout his time there, and was thus denied access to political authority. His status was simply that of a pastor who was in no position to dictate to the magisterial authorities who administered the city . . . Calvin's influence over Geneva rested ultimately not in his formal legal standing (which was insignificant) but in his considerable personal authority as a preacher and pastor.¹

—ALISTER E. MCGRATH

s the sun rises on another Lord's Day morning in mid-sixteenth-century Geneva, the majestic edifice of Saint Pierre Cathedral can be seen soaring high above the rooftops of the city. Inside, the vaulted ceiling rises to an enormous

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height far above the entire length of the sanctuary. A soul-gripping awe and a mind-stretching transcendence fill the worshipers who enter this sanctuary. But the grandeur of God is most clearly displayed here through the preaching of the infallible Word. This former Roman Catholic bastion is now a fortress of biblical truth. It has become a house of Reformed worship—a place where the exposition of Scripture is preeminent.

Citizens of Geneva gather here, increasingly imbibing the doctrinal truths of the Protestant Reformation. Along with them come beleaguered French Huguenots who have fled the tyranny of their Rome-entrenched homeland. Refugees also gather from Scotland and England, having escaped martyrdom at the hands of “Bloody Mary.” And other exiles pour in from throughout Europe, including Germany and Italy.

For one small group of French Huguenots, newly arrived in Geneva, this is a momentous occasion. Their previous worship experience was an isolated gathering with a few fellow believers, huddled behind a barn in France. Hunted like prey, they hid from the royal dragoon guards of the king of France. Having eluded these specially trained and armed soldiers at the border, they made their way to Geneva. As they approached the city, they could see the soaring spires of Saint Pierre, a welcome sight. They wound their way through the cobbled streets upward to the towering church. People of all sorts were streaming to the cathedral. The tall front doors leading into the sanctuary swung open, and they entered with the flow of

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worshipers. Never had they been seated in such an impressive edifice.

As the worshipers gather, their eyes are drawn to the great pulpit elevated far above the stone floor of the sanctuary. There it hangs, suspended on a massive column. Wrapping around this column is a spiral staircase that leads up to the wooden platform upon which the famed pulpit rests. John Calvin regularly stands here to expound the Word of God.

As the service begins, the Huguenots discover that only the Word of God is sung at Saint Pierre. The psalms are set to metered cadence and serve as the text for all congregational singing. The regulative principle—based on *sola Scriptura*—reigns here. As the service progresses, the assembled people sing out from the depths of their hearts. The Word preached in previous weeks and months has left its fire within them. The days of vain mantras and empty ritualism are over. Now the well-taught people raise their voices to magnify the Lord.

Following the congregational singing, the much-anticipated time comes. Calvin rises to expound the biblical text. Hearts are astounded; souls are arrested. Under the conviction and challenge of his expository preaching, the Huguenots are galvanized in their faith. Some of them are so stirred that, amazingly, they choose to return to their native France and face the wrath of the royal guards in order to plant Protestant churches there. The preaching is *that* commanding. The truth Calvin proclaims is *that* forceful. Never before have these French Protestants heard preaching like this.

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WHAT MARKED CALVIN'S PREACHING?

Whenever Calvin assumed the pulpit at Saint Pierre, it was a momentous occasion. But what distinguished Calvin's public proclamation of Scripture? What were the hallmarks that made his preaching so successful?

Every preacher who expounds God's Word brings a body of core values with him into the pulpit. These foundational commitments inevitably shape his preaching. His pulpit ministry is governed by what he believes Scripture to be, what place he assigns to preaching, and how he believes his preaching ought to be conducted. Calvin was no exception. The fundamental beliefs that the Genevan Reformer held regarding God's Word and the centrality of the Scriptures in church life defined his preaching long before he ever stood to exposit the Word. Calvin's deeply embedded convictions about the supreme authority of the Bible *demanded* an elevated view of the pulpit. He believed the pulpit must be primary in the life of the church because Scripture is sovereign over the lives of the people. Furthermore, this commitment to the undisputed authority of the Bible compelled him to preach verse by verse through entire books in the Bible.

As we begin to consider the distinctives of Calvin's preaching, this chapter focuses on his approach to the pulpit. Before the sermon ever began, Calvin's beliefs and understandings determined the nature of his preaching.

¶ DISTINCTIVE NO. 1: BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

In Calvin's day, the primary issue of the hour was authority in the church. Church traditions, papal edicts, and the decisions of ecclesiastical councils had taken precedence over biblical truth. But Calvin stood firmly on the chief cornerstone of the Reformation—*sola Scriptura*, or “Scripture alone.” He believed Scripture was the *verbum Dei*—the Word of God—and it *alone* should regulate church life, not popes, councils, or traditions. *Sola Scriptura* identified the Bible as the *sole* authority of God in His church, and Calvin wholeheartedly embraced it, insisting that the Bible was the authoritative, inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God.

Calvin believed that when the Bible was opened and rightly explained, the sovereignty of God was directly exerted over the congregation. As a result, he held that the minister's chief mandate was to preach the Word of God. He wrote, “Their [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.”² J. H. Merle D'Aubigné, the revered historian of the Reformation, notes, “In Calvin's view, everything that had not for its foundation the Word of God was futile and ephemeral boast; and the man who did not lean on Scripture ought to be deprived of his title of honor.”³ With this deep conviction about biblical authority, Calvin repeatedly entered the pulpit to minister exclusively from “the pure foundation of the Word.”⁴

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The Genevan Reformer knew that the authority of his preaching did not lie within himself. He said, “When we enter the pulpit, it is not so that we may bring our own dreams and fancies with us.”⁵ He saw the preacher—and especially himself—as merely a dispatched messenger with the divine message. He knew that “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.”⁶ It is the expositor’s task, he believed, to bring the supreme authority of the divine Word to bear directly on his listeners.

In this, Calvin admitted that he had no authority over others beyond what Scripture taught: “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.”⁷ He was sure that ecclesiastical status was no license for adding to God’s Word. For Calvin, any Bible teachers, small or great, who decide to “mingle their own inventions with the Word of God, or who advance anything that does not belong to it, must be rejected, how honourable soever may be their rank.”⁸

This understanding of the preacher’s role produced a profound sense of humility in Calvin as he rose to preach. He saw himself as standing *under* the authority of the Word. As Hughes Oliphant Old explains: “Calvin’s sermons . . . [reveal] a high sense of the authority of Scripture. The preacher himself believed he was preaching the Word of God. He saw himself

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to be the servant of the Word.”⁹ T. H. L. Parker agrees: “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.”¹⁰

Calvin’s high regard for biblical authority also fueled a deep reverence for Scripture. “The majesty of Scripture,” he said, “deserves that its expounders should make it apparent, that they proceed to handle it with modesty and reverence.”¹¹ His admiration for the Bible was driven by its blend of simple teachings, profound antinomies, plain language, intricate nuances, and cohesive unity. In Calvin’s view, to explore the height, depth, width, and breadth of the Bible was to revere its supernatural Author. Philip Schaff, the highly regarded Protestant historian, writes, “[Calvin] had the profoundest reverence for the Scriptures, as containing the Word of the living God and as the only infallible and sufficient rule of faith and duty.”¹²

For Calvin, then, handling Scripture was a sacred responsibility. Old captures it well when he observes that “the very fact that [Calvin’s] ministry was to expound the Word of God filled him with a profound reverence for the task before him.”¹³ As Calvin resolutely stated, “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.”¹⁴ This was the unshakable foundation of Calvin’s preaching—the authority of divinely inspired Scripture. He firmly believed that when the Bible speaks, God speaks.

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¶ DISTINCTIVE No. 2: DIVINE PRESENCE

Calvin's unwavering belief in biblical inspiration led him to maintain that when the Word is preached, God Himself is actually present. He believed there is a unique manifestation of God's presence in supernatural power through the public exposition of the written Word. "Wherever the gospel is preached," Calvin declared, "it is as if God Himself came into the midst of us."¹⁵ He added:

It is certain that if we come to church we shall not hear only a mortal man speaking but we shall feel (even by His secret power) that God is speaking to our souls, that He is the teacher. He so touches us that the human voice enters into us and so profits us that we are refreshed and nourished by it. God calls us to Him as if He had His mouth open and we saw Him there in person.¹⁶

The Holy Spirit, Calvin said, is actively at work in the preaching of the Word, and this powerful ministry of the Spirit was the sine qua non of Calvin's expository ministry. He stated that during public proclamation, "when the minister executes his commission faithfully, by speaking only what God puts into his mouth, the inward power of the Holy Spirit is joined with his outward voice."¹⁷ In fact, in all preaching, he affirmed, there must be an "inward efficacy of the Holy Spirit when He sheds forth His power upon hearers, that they

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may embrace a discourse by faith.”¹⁸ He believed God was not heard if His Spirit was not at work. This truth led him to say:

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.*¹⁹

On the other hand, Calvin noted that any dead orthodoxy on the preacher’s part invites the judgment of God. The power of the Spirit, he said, is “extinguished as soon as the Doctors blow their flutes . . . to display their eloquence.”²⁰ In other words, the Holy Spirit works through a preacher upon the listener only to the extent that the Word is taught correctly and clearly.

Not surprisingly, this belief in God’s powerful presence in preaching had a profound influence on Calvin’s view of the pulpit. He wrote, “The office of teaching is committed to pastors for no other purpose than that God alone may be heard there.”²¹ A life-transforming pulpit ministry, for Calvin, required the divine presence in power.

¶ DISTINCTIVE No. 3: PULPIT PRIORITY

Further, Calvin believed that biblical preaching must occupy the chief place in the worship service. What God has to say to man is infinitely more important than what man has to say to God. If the congregation is to worship properly, if believers are to be edified, if the lost are to be converted, God's Word *must* be exposited. Nothing must crowd the Scriptures out of the chief place in the public gathering.

The primacy of biblical preaching in Calvin's thought was undeniable: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."²² On the other hand, "An assembly in which the preaching of heavenly doctrine is not heard does not deserve to be reckoned a church."²³ In short, Calvin held that Bible exposition should occupy the primary place in the worship service, meaning that preaching is the primary role of the minister.

But not just any sort of preaching will do. Calvin wrote, "The truth of God is maintained by the pure preaching of the gospel."²⁴ He added, "God will have His church trained up by the pure preaching of His own Word, not by the contrivances of men [which are wood, hay and stubble]."²⁵ He knew that when sound biblical preaching vanishes from the church, doctrine and piety leave with it: "Piety would soon decay if the living preaching of doctrine should cease."²⁶ Quite simply,

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Calvin believed the church can be edified only by “the preaching of the gospel which is inwardly replete with a kind of solid majesty.”²⁷ Biblical preaching is *that* necessary and *that* noble.

According to the Genevan Ordinances of 1542, which Calvin himself penned, the primary duty of pastors, elders, and ministers is to announce the Word of God for instruction, admonition, exhortation, and reproof,²⁸ and no figure in church history exemplified that statement better than Calvin himself. He declared, “The aim of a good teacher, [is] to turn away the eyes of men from the world, that they may look up to heaven.”²⁹ Likewise, “The theologian’s task is not to divert the ears with clatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable.”³⁰ *This* is true preaching.

As Reformation theology established a foothold—largely though Calvin’s public exposition—dramatic changes began sweeping across Europe. Bible exposition returned to its central place in the church. James Montgomery Boice noted this realignment when he wrote:

When the Reformation swept over Europe in the sixteenth century, there was an immediate elevation of the Word of God in Protestant services. John Calvin particularly carried this out with thoroughness, ordering that the altars, long the centers of the Latin mass, be removed from the churches and that a pulpit with a Bible on it be placed at the center of the building. This was not to be on one side of the room, but at the

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very center, where every line of the architecture would carry the gaze of the worshiper to the Book which alone contains the way of salvation and outlines the principles upon which the church of the living God is to be governed.³¹

Calvin's convictions forced an emphasis on the priority of the pulpit. As the Bible was opened, reformation was unleashed.

▣ DISTINCTIVE NO. 4: SEQUENTIAL EXPOSITION

For the duration of his ministry, Calvin's approach was to preach systematically through entire books of the Bible. Rarely was he out of a book study. "Sunday after Sunday, day after day," Parker writes, "Calvin climbed up the steps into the pulpit. There he patiently led his congregation verse by verse through book after book of the Bible."³² Rare were the exceptions to this pattern. "Almost all Calvin's recorded sermons are connected series on books of the Bible."³³ As a faithful shepherd, he fed his congregation a steady diet of sequential expository messages.

This verse-by-verse style—*lectio continua*, the "continuous expositions"³⁴—guaranteed that Calvin would preach the full counsel of God. Difficult and controversial subjects were unavoidable. Hard sayings could not be skipped. Difficult doctrines could not be overlooked. The full counsel of God could be heard.

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Once the mature years of Calvin's ministry arrived, he "preached on a New Testament book on Sunday mornings and afternoons (although for a period on the Psalms in the afternoon) and on an Old Testament book on weekday mornings."³⁵ In this fashion, he covered major portions of the Scriptures. "The books of Scripture he is known to have preached through are: Genesis, Deuteronomy, Job, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, the Major and Minor Prophets, the Gospels, Acts, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, I and II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews. His last sermons were on the Book of Kings, February 2nd, and the Gospels, February 6th, 1564."³⁶

A famous example of this verse-by-verse preaching is seen in his 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—on the next verse! Similarly, Calvin became seriously ill in the first week of October 1558 and did not return to the pulpit until Monday, June 12, 1559—when he resumed at the very next verse in the book of Isaiah.³⁷ This man was fiercely committed to sequential expository preaching. For Calvin, "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."³⁸

Calvin's book studies were often protracted, lasting more than a year. For example, Calvin preached "89 sermons on Acts between 1549 and 1554, a shorter series on some of the

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Pauline letters between 1554 and 1558, and 65 sermons on the Harmony of the Gospels between 1559 and 1564. During this same time, on weekday mornings he preached series of sermons on Jeremiah and Lamentations up to 1550, on the Minor Prophets and Daniel from 1550 to 1552, 174 sermons on Ezekiel from 1552 to 1554, 159 sermons on Job from 1554 to 1555, 200 sermons on Deuteronomy from 1555 to 1556, 353 sermons on Isaiah from 1556 to 1559, 123 sermons on Genesis from 1559 to 1561, a short series on Judges in 1561, 107 sermons on 1 Samuel and 87 sermons on 2 Samuel from 1561 to 1563, and a series on 1 Kings in 1563 and 1564.”³⁹

Whether the biblical book was long and extensive, such as Genesis or Job, or brief and short, such as the New Testament epistles, Calvin was determined to preach every verse. His preaching style was a significant contributing factor to the power of his Genevan pulpit. In effect, a growing momentum was achieved as Calvin preached consecutively through Bible books, each message building on the previous. As he unfolded the book, the power of its argument increased.

A HIGH VIEW OF PREACHING

Calvin’s high view of preaching was undergirded by a high view of God, a high view of Scripture, and an accurate view of man. For Calvin, the four distinctives covered in this chapter—biblical authority, divine presence, pulpit priority, and sequential exposition—were inseparably linked. They stood or fell together.

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In Calvin's words, preaching is "the living voice" of God "in His church."⁴⁰ He reasoned: "God begets and multiplies His church only by means of His Word. . . . It is by the preaching of the grace of God alone that the church is kept from perishing."⁴¹ This was Calvin's commitment to preaching, and it must be that of all preachers based on the mandate of Scripture.

Where are such men of God today? Where are the preachers like Calvin, who will preach the Word with unwavering commitment? Where are the pastors who believe that God is uniquely with them as they mount their pulpits for the exposition of His Word? Where are the shepherds who have prioritized the preaching of the Word in public worship? Where are the expositors who will preach entire books of the Bible consecutively month after month and year after year?

A long-awaited return to *biblical* preaching is direly needed. Such was the case in sixteenth-century Geneva, and such is the case today. May God raise up a new generation of expositors who are equipped and empowered to proclaim the Word.

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