

Evangelisation in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin

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There is a widely held view that Calvin had no theology of mission that envisaged a role for the Church. Pete Wilcox challenges this view with reference to Calvin's Commentaries on the Prophetic Books of the OT. Delivered as lectures to students and pastors, they show a keen interest in and expectation of the progress of the Kingdom of Christ, measured, naturally enough, in the progress of the Reformed faith. Wilcox acknowledges the limitations of Calvin's own vision; while his theoretical perspectives were universal, his own practical interest was restricted to western Europe.

There is a view, to which Bishop Stephen Neill subscribed, that the writings of the Reformers afford 'exceedingly little' evidence of any concern for 'the progress of the preaching of the Gospel through the world'.¹ More specifically, there is a view that John Calvin had no theology of the mission of the Church. As Gustav Warneck put it, 'there is [in Calvin's theology] no recognition of the duty of the Church to send out missionaries'.²

Perhaps this view rests upon the assumption that Calvin was 'a man of one book',³ whose thought is comprehensively expressed in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁴ However, if it is true the *Institutes* include little which amounts to a theology of mission, it is also true that at this point the work fails to convey the full scope of its author's thought. Elsewhere, Calvin propounded a doctrine of Christ's Kingdom, and in particular of 'the progress of the Kingdom', which was vigorous and full of missionary imperatives. The purpose of this article is to give an account of the doctrine as it appears in Calvin's exposition of the prophetic books of the Old Testament⁵, and to show how it relates to the evangelistic activity in which he himself was engaged at the time when these expositions were produced.

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1. S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1964, p 222.
 2. G. Warneck, *Outline of A History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time: A Contribution to Modern Church History*, tr. G. Robson, Oliphant, London 1981, pp 167ff.
 3. E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les Hommes et les Choses de son Temps*, 7 vols., Lausanne 1899-1917, vol. iv.1.
 4. 'The whole of Calvinism is in the *Institutes*', P. Imbart de la Tour, *Calvin et l'Institution Chrétienne*, Paris 1935, p 55; '[The *Institutes*] present a synthesis of Calvinist thought [which] is sufficient in itself', F. Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, Collins, London 1963, p 111. But cf. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, SCM Press, London 1971, pp 1-5, for an explanation of the deliberate complementarity of the *Institutes* and Calvin's commentaries.
 5. Calvin considered the Psalms to be a prophetic work, and refers to the Psalmist as 'the Prophet' throughout his Commentary.

The Kingdom of Christ and Calvin's Old Testament expositions

Between 1557 and 1565, commentaries by Calvin were published on all the prophetic books of the Old Testament. In fact, only two of these seven publications (the *Commentary on the Psalms* and the revised *Commentary on Isaiah*) are 'commentaries' in the sense of being continuous expositions of the biblical text, written or dictated by the author himself. The remaining five works are transcripts of lectures Calvin gave in the school at Geneva, and were prepared for publication by his friends.⁶

These seven publications are of particular interest for the study of Calvin's views on evangelisation, for two reasons. Firstly, they date from a time when Calvin's horizons moved beyond Geneva, to the propagation of the reformed faith throughout western Europe. Between 1555 and 1564, several hundred envoys were sent out from Geneva on assignments to nascent reformed congregations, especially in France, but also in cities such as Turin, Antwerp, and London.⁷ Although almost all these assignments took place within the borders of Christendom, it is clear that those who were involved in them regarded them as truly 'evangelistic' endeavours. Their purpose was to propagate the Gospel, and to establish an effective Christian witness where none was believed to exist. Secondly, at least as far as the five works which constitute transcripts of Calvin's lectures are concerned, the publications represent the one most important element in the theological training which the missionary envoys received. Calvin's lectures had a very specific vocational purpose. They were delivered to a mixed audience of 'students, ministers and other hearers',⁸ three groups which were intensely interested in the progress of the reformed Church. Many of the students who enrolled in Geneva between 1555 and 1561 were despatched to serve as pastors in France even before Calvin died in 1564. Similarly, many of those who were already ministers in Geneva before 1555 were sent out as envoys to France during the next ten years. Most of the other hearers were religious refugees who had fled from France, Italy, England and Scotland, and who wished to see the reformed church established in the countries from which they had come. It was for missionaries in training, for envoys on furlough in Geneva and for other interested parties that Calvin's lectures were intended; and it is in this light that they are to be read.

The principal theme of these expositions is 'the progress of Christ's Kingdom'. The subject enjoys a prominence and a breadth of treatment in these works which it is not given in the *Institutes*. However, the distinctive

6 T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1986, pp 20-21.

7 R. M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563*, Librarie Droz, Geneva 1956.

8 N. Colladon, *Vie de Calvin*, CO 21.71. 'CO' references are to line, page and volume of the *Iohannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, eds. G. Baum, C. Cunitz and E. Reuss, Schwetschke and Sons, Brunswick 1870. Translations are my own. For Calvin's expositions of the Prophets, an additional reference is given to the somewhat unreliable Calvin Translation Society edition (CTS, Edinburgh 1845-1853).

feature about this concept as it appears in these expositions is not simply its prominence, but the way that it functions as a framework for the rehearsal of salvation history.

The progress of the Kingdom of Christ and salvation history⁹

The characteristic mark of Calvin's exposition of the Prophets is his view that prophecy has a triple reference. He consistently maintains that it refers firstly to an imminent historical event (such as the return of the people from exile) or to a contemporary person (such as David), secondly to 'Christ' (which sometimes means 'the Incarnation', sometimes 'the ascension', and sometimes 'the apostolic era and the preaching of the Gospel'), and thirdly to the whole course of history up until the Last Day (on which grounds he applies them to the sixteenth century Church). As Calvin formulates it, then, the doctrine of Christ's Kingdom functions as a framework for his exposition of salvation history. He construes the history of God's people, at least from the time of the return of the people of Israel from exile, as the history of the Kingdom of Christ.

In a lecture on Ezek. 17:22 given in 1564, Calvin made a comment typical of the interpretative scheme which he consistently brought to bear on the prophetic books. He proposed that when the Kingdom of Christ is under discussion,

'we must take its beginning to be the building of the temple when the people returned to their homeland after seventy years. Then, we must take its consummation to be, not at the ascension of Christ, nor even in the first or second centuries, but in the whole progress of his Kingdom until he appears at the Last Day.'¹⁰

The comment illustrates the degree to which Calvin is able to locate Christ's Kingdom in history. From the perspective of the sixteenth century he can look back at its beginnings, and forward to its consummation; between these two points, he can chart its inexorable progress. Together, the beginning, the progress and the consummation of Christ's Kingdom constitute what he repeatedly refers to as the *totum Christi regnum*, or the *totum cursum Christi regni*.¹¹ Calvin frequently suggests that a particular prophecy relates 'to the whole course of the Kingdom of Christ, from its beginnings right up to its end'. Such phrases are repeated so often in these lectures on the prophets that they acquire the character of a refrain.¹²

9 For much of the material in this section I am indebted to chs. 4, 6 and 8 of T. Palmer, *John Calvin's View of the Kingdom of God*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Aberdeen 1991.

10 Comm. Ezek. 17:22, CO 40.417.31-37, CTS II.207-8.

11 *totum Christi regnum*: e.g.: Comm. Isa. 12:3, CO 36.253.21, CTS I.401. *totum cursum Christi regni*: e.g.: Comm. Joel 2:30, CO 42.573.56, CTS II.103.

12 E.g., Comm. Zech. 14:21, CO 44.390.45, CTS V.454: 'In the usual prophetic manner, the Kingdom of Christ from beginning to end is depicted here'.

The beginnings of the Kingdom of Christ

Calvin acknowledged that there were differences between the Old Testament and the New¹³; but his perception of Christ as the substance of the Covenants and the scope of the Scriptures led him to emphasise not only the theological continuity between the Old Testament and the New, but their historical continuity too. Calvin saw no neat break at the crucifixion, between the Old Covenant and the New. Instead, he viewed the exilic and post-exilic periods of the Old Testament as an interval which belonged both to the Old Covenant and to the New, and yet fully to neither.

The significance of this may be overstated; but the conclusion is warranted by the fact, firstly, that Calvin regarded the exile as an interruption of the covenant.¹⁴ Secondly, and correspondingly, he regarded the return from exile as a new beginning,¹⁵ 'the second birth of the Church'.¹⁶ More particularly, he considered the deliverance effected by God for Israel at the end of the exile to be an 'anagoge' of the deliverance which Christ came to accomplish.¹⁷ 'No wonder that the prophets interweave that inauguration of grace with Christ's Kingdom', he exclaims.¹⁸ Since a course of redemption began at that point which continued right down to the end of the Kingdom of Christ,¹⁹ its beginning may be considered to date from the end of the exile.

Yet, on the other hand, Calvin commonly distinguishes between the end of the exile, which was an immediate fulfilment of the prophets' oracles, and the Kingdom of Christ (which was their ultimate referent).²⁰ The end of the exile was only the beginning of Christ's Kingdom in the sense of being a prelude to what was to follow.²¹ The 'proper' inauguration of the Kingdom of Christ only took place at the coming of Christ. Calvin does not mean that the Kingdom of Christ began at his nativity (this he dismisses as a 'senseless' idea),²² but when he ascended into heaven.²³ Even this is not to be thought of as a momentary event, since the means by which the ascended Christ established his reign was the promulgation of the Gospel. For this reason Calvin also identifies the beginning of Christ's Kingdom with the apostolic era, or with 'the preaching of the Gospel which was begun under Caligula, Claudius, Nero and their successors'.²⁴

13 Inst. II.xi, pp 449-464; OS III.423-436. 'OS' references are to line, page and volume of the *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, ed. P. Banh and W. Niesel, Chr. Kaiser, Munich 1957-1962. Page numbers are also provided to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, tr. F. L. Battles, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1960.

14 Comm. Ezek. 11:17, CO 40.241.21, CTS I.369; Comm. Zech. 2:12, CO 44.165.4-5, CTS V.77.

15 Comm. Dan. 8:1, CO 41.87, CTS II.80.

16 Comm. Isa. 43:19, CO 37.94.51-95.7, CTS III.341-342; Comm. Dan. 8:1, CO 41.87, CTS II.80.

17 Comm. Isa. 61:3, CO 37.374.37, CTS IV.308; Comm. Hag. 2:7-10, CO 44.107.56, CTS IV.363.

18 Comm. Isa. 42:1, CO 37.58.16, CTS III.284.

19 Comm. Isa. 60:15, CO 37.365.18, CTS IV.293.

20 Comm. Isa. 9:5, CO 36.194.20, CTS I.306; Comm. Isa. 11:11, CO 36.246.10, CTS I.390; Comm. Ezek. 17:23, CO 40.418.53, CTS II.210.

21 Comm. Jer. 3:17-18, CO 37.566.24, CTS I.186.

22 Comm. Dan. 2:44, CO 40.606.18, CTS I.186.

23 Inst. II.xvi.14, OS III.501.25. Calvin also makes this point in his comments on Daniel 7 (Comm. Dan. 7:8, CO 41.50.12-35, CTS II.26-27; Comm. Dan. 7:13, CO 41.60.41, CTS II.42).

24 Comm. Dan. 7:8, CO 41.50.45, CTS II.27; Comm. Mic. 4:3, CO 43.348.3, CTS III.265.

The consummation of the Kingdom of Christ

On occasions, however, Calvin also speaks as if the apostolic era was the period in which the Kingdom of Christ attained its consummation. This is the case especially when he expounds prophetic texts which refer to the rule of God over 'the nations', and the extension of worship 'to the ends of the earth'. He interprets these as prophecies of the Kingdom of Christ, fulfilled during the lifetimes of the apostles.

For example, the text of Jer. 49:6 prompts Calvin to consider the connection between the Kingdom of Christ and the calling of the Gentiles. He suggests that,

'The prophet had respect to the Kingdom of Christ here. There is no doubt that the promise extended right up to his coming, for he is speaking about the calling of the Gentiles, which God deferred until he manifested his Son to the world.'²⁵

For Calvin, the calling of the Gentiles was the means by which the kingdom of Christ was extended to the ends of the earth,²⁶ and was a process which took place at the time of Christ's coming. 'By [his] coming... true religion, which had previously been shut up within the narrow limits of Judea, was spread throughout the whole world.'²⁷ Calvin explains that the *vocatio Gentium* did not take place during the time of Christ's 'humiliation' (his earthly ministry), but only after his ascension, when the proclamation of the Gospel began.²⁸ He saw the apostolic era as a 'Golden Age', in which

'the propagation of the Gospel within a short period of time was incredible, and the progress which accompanied it was equally extraordinary.'²⁹

It was a time when,

'God suddenly became known everywhere, through the Gospel... For we know that Christ penetrated at great speed, from east to west, like a flash of lightning, in order to bring Gentiles into the Church from all sides.'³⁰

The phrase 'through the Gospel' is significant. It is a shorthand expression, meaning 'through the preaching of the Gospel in the apostolic era'. Thus, Calvin observes that a particular prophecy

'should be extended up to the preaching of the Gospel. For although Christ was born about one generation before that time, he only shone out to the world when he became known through the Gospel.'³¹

The consistent thrust of such statements is that by their preaching of the Gospel, the apostles established Christ's Kingdom throughout the entire world, in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and the commandment of Christ. This point, although without reference to Old Testament prophecy,

25 Comm. Jer. 49:6, CO 39.352.29-33, CTS V.63.

26 Comm. Ps. 47:10, CO 31.471.5-9, CTS II.214.

27 Comm. Ps. 87 *Argumentum*, CO 31.799.40-42, CTS III.395.

28 Inst. II.xi.12, p 461; OS III.434-435.

29 Comm. Ps. 87 *Argumentum*, CO 31.799.53-57, CTS III.395. For 'the Golden Age' of the apostolic era, see CO 31.800.4, CTS III.395.

30 Comm. Ps. 22:28, CO 31.235.29-35, CTS I.386.

31 Comm. Dan. 11:45, CO 41.285.4243, CTS II.367.

is explicit in the *Institutes* (and also in Calvin's interpretation of certain critical passages in the New Testament).³²

Apostles were sent... to establish his Kingdom everywhere by the preaching of the Gospel.³³

Calvin did not consider apostleship to be an aspect of the ordinary ministry of the Church. The apostles were the 'first builders of the Church', raised up 'at the beginning of [Christ's] Kingdom'.³⁴

In a much-heralded article, it has been suggested by Dankbaar that 'there is an echo here' of the legend which was 'current in the Middle Ages' and 'influential during the Reformation as well', of the *divisio apostolorum*. 'According to this legend, the Apostles had preached the Gospel, as they were commanded to do, each in a particular part of the world'. Given that the apostles took the Gospel to the ends of the earth, the implication runs, there was no need for the sixteenth-century Church to do so. Dankbaar insists that only Luther challenged the legend.³⁵

The suggestion may not be entirely unfounded. However, two things should be said in mitigation of it. Firstly, Calvin states quite specifically in the *Institutes* (and also in his *Commentary on I Corinthians*) that 'no set limits are assigned to [apostles]'.³⁶ Admittedly, his principal objective is to contrast apostles (to whom no set limits are assigned) with pastors (who are bound strictly to one local church). However, there is the possibility that there is 'an echo' here of Calvin's rejection of the legend.

Secondly, it was evidently not, in itself, respect for the legend which led Calvin to depict the apostolic ministry in these terms. He was probably moved by two considerations. It appears (from his explanation of 'the Great Commission' in Matthew 28)³⁷ that in restricting apostleship in this way, his intention was partly to counter the prevailing Roman Catholic emphasis on apostolic succession. Then it seems that, in stating that Christ's Kingdom 'has been spread through the whole earth by the preaching of the Gospel',³⁸ Calvin is also seeking to do justice to the decisive significance for salvation history of the coming of Christ. This is his customary practice. He regards the effect of the Gospel as 'extraordinary', 'amazing', 'incredible', 'sudden' and 'total'. He can assert that in it, prophecy 'has been fulfilled',³⁹ and can maintain that during the apostolic era the Kingdom of Christ,

32 e.g., Comm. Matt. 28:19, CO 45.821.39-42, CNTC III.250; Comm. 1 Cor. 12:28, CO 49.506.19-28, CNTC p 270. 'CNTC' references are to page and volume of Calvin's New Testament Commentaries published by The Saint Andrew's Press, Edinburgh 1972.

33 Inst IV.iii.4, p 1057; OS V.46.9-12.

34 Inst IV.iii.4, p 1057, 1056; OS V.46.12; 45.35.

35 Dankbaar W. F., 'L'apostolat chez Calvin', *Revue d'Histoire et Philosophie Religieuse* 41 (1961), pp 345-354, p 347.

36 Inst IV.iii.4, p 1056; OS V.46.2; Comm. 1 Cor. 12:28, CO 49.506.25-32, CNTC p 270.

37 Comm. Matt. 28:19, CO 45.821.47-54, CNTC III.250.

38 Comm. Isa. 26:15, CO 36.442.2, CTS II.232.

39 Comm. Mic. 4:1-2, CO 43.339.52, CTS III.250; Comm. Jer. 33:9, CO 39.57.44, CTS IV.239.

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'increased wonderfully and beyond expectation until it reached an immense size and filled the whole earth.'⁴⁰

It is in his attempt to convey the ultimate significance of Christ's coming, that Calvin sometimes creates the impression that his Kingdom is already complete.

On the other hand, Calvin also affirms that 'the Kingdom of Christ has not yet been completed',⁴¹ and that its consummation will occur only at the Last Day.

When Christ ascends his judgement seat to judge the world, then that which began to take place at the inauguration of the Gospel... shall be fully accomplished.⁴²

For Calvin there is a sense in which, if the beginning of the Kingdom lies within this world order, its consummation lies outside it.⁴³ This notion fuels his constant ridicule of Jewish commentators, who 'dream only of an earthly Kingdom of Christ'.⁴⁴ By 'the Kingdom of Christ', Calvin means 'not only that which is begun here, but that which shall be completed on the Last Day'.⁴⁵

The progress of the Kingdom of Christ

For Calvin, the character of the present moment and of the whole of salvation history, is determined by the fact that it falls between the beginning of Christ's Kingdom and its consummation. It is this which gives Calvin's theology its eschatological cast and orientation to the future. According to Calvin, there is an uninterrupted 'course' from the beginning of the Kingdom of Christ until its consummation (*ab initio regni Christi usque ad finem*) such that the period between these two moments is essentially one of progress.

In a profound exploration of Calvin's eschatology, T. F. Torrance has drawn attention to the Dedicatory Epistle which Calvin addressed to Duke Nicholas Radzivil in 1560, when he revised his *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. 'When we speak of the Kingdom of Christ', Calvin wrote, 'we must respect two things: the doctrine of the Gospel... [and] the society of the godly'.⁴⁶ Torrance rightly observes that

this means that in so far as we think of the *Regnum Christi* in terms of Christ Himself and His Gospel, the Kingdom is already complete, and in that sense Calvin can well say that all things have already been accomplished and we await only the final revelation of Christ in glory.⁴⁷

However, in so far as we think of it in terms of the society of the godly, we are confronted with an incomplete edifice. In this respect, the consummation of

40 Comm. Dan. 2:40-43, CO 40.602.46-50, CTS I.180.

41 Comm. Isa. 60:18, CO 37.368.27, CTS III.296.

42 Comm. Isa. 45:23, CO 37.150.12-15, CTS III.428.

43 Comm. Isa. 11:13, CO 36.247.40, CTS I.392.

44 Comm. Isa. 11:14, CO 36.248.23, CTS I.394.

45 Comm. Isa. 35:1, CO 36.590.51, CTS III.62.

46 Epistle 3232 (hereafter abbreviated to Ep. 3232), CO 18.157. Translation from T. F. Torrance, 'The Eschatology of Hope', p 115 (in his *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformers*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1956, ch. iv).

47 Torrance, *Eschatology*, p 115.

Christ's Kingdom lies in the future. Furthermore, Torrance is also right to say that :

Calvin sees [the reign of Christ between His two advents] in the historical perspective of the two ages, the old world and the new world to come, but like the New Testament he thinks of them as overlapping.⁴⁸

Since these two aspects of the Kingdom, like the two advents of Christ, are inseparable, the progress of the Kingdom is ineluctable. The inauguration of the Kingdom presupposes and effectually guarantees its consummation.

There is a danger that Calvin will be misunderstood here. He might be taken to mean that after the astonishing growth of the Kingdom of Christ during the apostolic era, and given that the consummation of the Kingdom lies outside this world order, there is nothing for the Church to do but await the revelation of the Kingdom on the Last Day. Indeed, Calvin invites this misunderstanding when he avers that 'Christ's Kingdom is neither promoted nor upheld by human effort'.⁴⁹ Yet this would be a misunderstanding, for although Calvin locates the consummation of the Kingdom at the Last Day and attributes the realisation of it to God alone, he also stresses that the period between the first coming of Christ and the last is characterised not by a passive waiting, but by the Church's active participation in this inexorable progress. It is the responsibility of each Christian, and especially of rulers, to promote the Kingdom of Christ.⁵⁰

Moreover, to say that the progress of the Kingdom is inexorable is not to say that it is straightforward or unimpeded. On the contrary, it is inevitable that the Kingdom of Christ will be 'assailed by innumerable enemies from time to time until the end of the world'.⁵¹ The Kingdom of Christ is ranged against the Kingdom of Satan,⁵² and those who accept Christ's Kingdom 'must wage irreconcilable war with him who is plotting its ruin'.⁵³ Conflict is inevitable not because the Kingdom of Christ is essentially militant, however.

'Of itself, the Kingdom of Christ would be peaceful... but because of human malice and wickedness, it is never erected without tumults being provoked'.⁵⁴

This double stress on the inevitable yet accidental nature of the conflicts which accompany the progress of Christ's Kingdom, serves Calvin well in relation to the struggles of the reformed Church in the sixteenth century. It allows him, on the one hand, to assure reformed protestants (especially in France) that the persecutions and martyrdoms they face are to be expected. On the other hand, it allows him to assure Roman Catholic princes (again, particularly in France) that the disturbances associated with the reformation

48 Torrance, *Eschatology*, p 119.

49 Comm. Ps. 118:25, CO 32.213.24, CTS IV.396.

50 Comm. Isa. 36:10, CO 36.604.50, CTS III.85; Comm. Isa. 49:23, CO 37.211.12, CTS IV.40.

51 Comm. Ps. 110:1, CO 32.161.45, CTS IV.299.

52 The phrases *regnum diaboli/Satanae*, and *regnum Anachristi*, though rare in the commentaries, occur 16 times in the *Institutio*.

53 Inst. I.xiv.15, p 174, OS III.165.33.

54 Comm. Ps. 2:1-2, CO 31.43.41-3, CTS I.299.

are not calculated or treacherous.⁵⁵ Needless to say, even if, urged on by Satan, the whole world conspires 'to prevent the progress of the Kingdom of Christ', its efforts will be in vain.⁵⁶

The progress of the Kingdom of Christ, the Church and the Word of God

Calvin identifies the Kingdom of Christ with the Church. Repeatedly and without qualification, he asserts that 'the Church is Christ's Kingdom'.⁵⁷ Furthermore, this identification is not of the Kingdom of Christ with 'the elect' (the invisible Church), but of the Kingdom of Christ with the institutional (or visible) Church. This is no more than one would expect, given the degree to which Calvin is concerned with the progress of the Kingdom within history.

The finality of the equivalence he posits between the visible Church and the Kingdom of Christ makes the question of where this Church is to be found acute for Calvin. Which visible Church is Christ's Kingdom? In his attempt to establish the legitimacy of the sixteenth-century reformed Church over against the Papacy, Calvin (together, of course, with other reformers) distinguished between the true Church and the false.⁵⁸ Only the true Church is the Kingdom of Christ. His exposition of the prophets gave Calvin reasons to contend that the mere title 'Church' was not enough. The ministry of the prophets convinced him that there have always been those who have laid claim to the name 'Church', but have not possessed its reality. Although it is Christ's Kingdom, the institution of the Church is not itself essential.

Since the Church is Christ's Kingdom, and he reigns by his Word alone, will it not be clear to anyone that those are lying words, by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from his sceptre (that is, his most holy Word).⁵⁹

The true Church is contingent. It depends, moment by moment, on the Word of God, and has no independent existence.

The form of the Church

Calvin means, in the first place, that the Church derives its form from the Word of God. Brought into being by God's Word, the Church is sustained only by the continual hearing of it. Derivative by nature, it can exist only in obedient response to the Word.

When he refers to 'the form of the Church', especially in the *Institutes*, it is usually the case that Calvin is speaking about institutional structures, or 'polity'. It need hardly be said that Calvin understood the dependence of the Church upon the Word of God to imply the conformity of its structures to the

55 Comm. Dan. Dedicatory Epistle, CO 40.18.617, CTS I.lxviii; cf. Comm. Dan. 2:32-35, CO 40.592.37-40, CTS I.166.

56 Comm. Zech. 4:7, CO 44.187.9, CTS V.114.

57 Inst. IV.ii.4, p 1046 (1536); OS V.36.2; cf. Comm. Isa. 45:18, CO 37.143.38, CTS III.418; Comm. Isa. 65:20, CO 37.430.51, CTS IV.401.

58 Inst. IV.ii, p 1041; OS V.30.27.

59 Inst. IV.ii.4, p 1046; OS V.36.2-6.

Scriptures.⁶⁰ On this basis, he denounced the Papacy for retaining a polity which had no scriptural foundation, and stressed the biblical basis of the four-fold ministry of the reformed Church.

However, it would be a mistake to treat 'the form of the Church' only in terms of church polity, as if the relationship between the Word of God and the Church were static for Calvin. Indeed, the significance of the fact that Calvin kept 'the marks' which distinguish the true Church from the false to a bare minimum, is precisely that he did not conceive of its 'form' entirely in this way.

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.⁶¹

In all respects, except for these two, Calvin is prepared to allow for diversity in church order. He acknowledges that, since church structures 'ought to be accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be appropriate to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones'.⁶² It is not only for ecumenical considerations that Calvin adopts so minimalist a definition of the marks of the true Church. He is also motivated by a concern to emphasise that the Church, in every generation and every new situation, is to hear the Word of God afresh.

This minimalist approach leaves Calvin with a particular difficulty with regard to the Church of Rome. On the one hand, it is transparent to Calvin that the Papacy does not retain either the Word or the Sacraments in their original purity. He can say 'that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the Church'.⁶³ On the other hand, the fact that 'the Lord preserves in them a remnant of his people' forces Calvin to concede that it retains some 'appearance' of the Church.⁶⁴

However, Calvin does not define the form of the Church exclusively in these static terms. For him, the conformity to God's Word upon which the Church's existence depends is a continually active obedience. This is the more usual thrust of Calvin's condemnation of the Papacy in his expositions of the Prophets: it has ceased to heed Christ's voice.⁶⁵ If his repudiation of 'the Romanists' claim to the title of the Church is more whole-hearted in his lectures than it is in the *Institutes*, it is because Calvin's expositions dwell on the constant need of the Church to depend on God's Word. If the Papacy no longer cherishes the docility which is the basis of its existence, his argument runs, it is no longer a church.

In terms of the form of the Church, then, the progress of the Kingdom of Christ amounts to the growth of the Church in its conformity to the Word of

60 Inst. IV.iv.4, p 1072, OS V.61.12-15; IV.x.30, p 1207, OS V.192.14-16.

61 Inst. IV. i. 9, p 1023; OS V.13.24-27.

62 Inst. IV.x.30, p 1208; OS V.192.36-193.1.

63 Inst. IV.ii.12, p 1053; OS V.42.16-17.

64 Comm. Ezek. 16:21, CO 40.354.36, CTS II.121; cf. Inst. IV.ii.12, p 1053; OS V.42.12; Inst. IV.ii.11, p 1051; OS V.41.1.

65 Comm. Isa. 11:4, CO 36.240.43-47, CTS I.382.

God. Calvin states that if it 'has the ministry of the Word and honours it, [and] the administration of the sacraments',⁶⁶ the Church is holy. Yet this holiness does not preclude progress. For,

'the Lord is daily at work in smoothing out wrinkles and cleansing spots. From this it follows that the holiness of the Church is not yet complete. The Church is holy then in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect. It makes progress from day to day, but has not yet reached its goal of holiness.'⁶⁷

Where true churches are already, the progress of Christ's Kingdom consists of growth in holiness.

The function of the Church

According to Calvin, the Church is not only to be a hearing community but a speaking one too. It is not only to obey the Word of God; it is also to proclaim it.

In his study *John Calvin's View of the Kingdom of God*, Palmer has observed that the word *regnum* in Calvin's latin carries an ambiguity which is lost in the English word 'kingdom'. *Regnum* conveys 'both the idea of the kingdom or the realm of a king and also the concept of kingship or royal authority'.⁶⁸ When Calvin speaks of the Church as the Kingdom of Christ, he means that it is not only the realm over which Christ reigns (which exists by its hearing of the Word), but the agency through which he exercises his reign (which exists to proclaim the Word). The function of the Church corresponds to its form.

Christ's sceptre, then, is not simply held over the Church, to exact its obedience; it is also held by the Church. Or rather, this sceptre is entrusted to the Church, in the form of the Gospel, but continues to be held by Christ.

'Christ has entrusted to his ministers his Gospel, which is the sceptre of his Kingdom, and has committed it, as it were, to their keeping.'

Furthermore,

'Christ, by his ministers, has subdued to his dominion the whole world, and has erected as many principalities under his authority as there have been churches gathered to him in various nations by their preaching.'⁶⁹

The significance of this latter quotation is two-fold. First of all, it confirms that according to Calvin, Christ has extended his Kingdom through the ordinary ministry of the Church: the preaching of the Gospel was not entrusted to the Apostles alone. Secondly, it suggests that he equated the extension of the Kingdom with the establishment of churches. Where false churches prevail, therefore, the progress of the Kingdom of Christ consists in the foundation of true churches. Calvin's exposition of the Lord's Prayer in the final edition of the *Institutes* is illuminating in this context. He suggests that when we pray 'thy Kingdom come',

66 Inst. IV.i.9, p 1023; OS V.14.16-17.

67 Inst. IV.i.17, p 1031; OS V.21.12-16.

68 Palmer, p 62

69 Comm. Ps. 45:16, CO 31.453.29-34, CTS II.193; cf. Comm. Isa. 45.14, CO 37.141.4-6, CTS III.414.

'We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth [and] that he spread and increase them in number.'⁷⁰

It remains to be shown that Calvin considered the pastors despatched from Geneva to France (as well as ministers and magistrates committed to the reformed cause elsewhere) to be engaged in the establishment of 'true' churches by the preaching of the Gospel, and thus to be contributing to the propagation of Christ's Kingdom.

The progress of the Kingdom of Christ and the Reformation

As it appears in his lectures on the Prophets, then, the notion of the progress of the Kingdom of Christ functions for Calvin as a framework for the exposition of salvation history. Caught in the interval between Christ's two advents, the Church participates in the inexorable progress of his Kingdom. Since Calvin considered this progress to have begun at the preaching of the apostles, and to be consummated only at the Last Day, it is no surprise to find him making explicit in the lectures what these views imply: that the progress of Christ's Kingdom is manifest in the events of the mid-sixteenth century.

'The Kingdom of Christ began in the world when God commanded the Gospel to be proclaimed everywhere, and even today its course has not yet reached completion.'⁷¹

Or again:

'When Christ ascends his judgement seat to judge the world, then that which began to take place at the inauguration of the Gospel, and which continues to take place before our eyes every day, shall be fully accomplished.'⁷²

In this context it is particularly illuminating to bear in mind the nature of Calvin's audience. It has been already suggested that even if not all of those who attended Calvin's lectures were missionaries in training, the majority were caught up with him in an evangelistic enterprise.

If explicit references to this enterprise are rare in the lectures, they are common in Calvin's correspondence. His letters leave the reader in no doubt that Calvin understood his own ministry, and that of his colleagues in the reformed Church, as furthering the progress of Christ's Kingdom.

When, for example, Calvin reflected on his own past, he could boast that 'Wherever I have been, I have faithfully endeavoured... to further the kingdom of Jesus Christ'.⁷³ With regard to political upheavals in France (widely blamed on the reformed Church) he could disclaim, 'It is no fault of mine if the Kingdom of Christ does not progress quietly'.⁷⁴

70 Inst. III.xx.42, p 905; OS IV.353.8-10.

71 Comm. Mic. 4:3, CO 43.348.3-6, CTS III.265.

72 Comm. Isa. 45:23, CO 37.150.12-15, CTS III.428.

73 Ep. 2173, CO 15.537: Calvin au Senat de Berne (1555). An English translation may be found in J. Bonnet ed.: *Letters of John Calvin* (tr. D. Constable and M. R. Gilchrist): Vols. I & II, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh 1855-57; Vols III & IV, B. Franklin, New York 1858); Vol. III.148.

74 Ep. 3485, CO 18.620: Calvinus Piis Gallis (1561). CTS Dan. I.lxx.

As far as Calvin was concerned, the progress of the Kingdom of Christ in the mid-sixteenth century was equivalent to the progress of the reformed Church (or, as he himself put it, to 'the increase of the [reformed] Church'.⁷⁵) This is evident from the two ways in which he habitually gauged its progress. In the first place, Calvin considered the progress of Christ's Kingdom to consist in the establishment of reformed (or 'true') churches, where none existed. It is at this point that Calvin attached such importance to the role of the magistrate. Whether in the Dedicatory Epistles which Calvin composed to accompany his publications, or in his private correspondence, he is often to be found commending kings and princes for their 'zeal' for the progress of the Kingdom of Christ, or reminding them of their responsibility for it.⁷⁶ In 1560 Calvin wrote in these terms to Nicolas Radzivil of Poland;⁷⁷ and the following year he assured James Stuart of Scotland that :

'Although I have not met you face to face, the zeal and constancy which you have shown to promote the Kingdom of Christ is well-known to me'.⁷⁸

Secondly, as he informed the King of Navarre, Calvin considered Christ's Kingdom to involve 'the salvation of [individual believers] and of the whole world'.⁷⁹ In his view, an increase in the number of believers represented the progress of the Kingdom. It is no marvel to Calvin that when Satan sees 'the Kingdom of God's Son advancing and the number of the faithful increasing', he should redouble his efforts to subvert the reformed cause in France.⁸⁰

In both these respects (that is, with regard to the establishment of true churches, and with regard to the task of increasing the number of the faithful) Calvin attached first importance to ministers, and above all to preachers.⁸¹ This comes across most clearly in the letters Calvin wrote between 1555 and 1564, concerning individual envoys who were being despatched to France from Geneva. For example, in recommending a new pastor to the Church in Dieppe in 1558, Calvin refers to 'the zeal he has to advance the Kingdom of Jesus Christ'.⁸² The labours of Beza, Fornelet and de Passy in France and of others elsewhere all contribute to the advancement of Christ's Kingdom.⁸³

75 Comm. Ps. 102:21, CO 32.71.33-36, CTS IV.118; Comm. Isa. 26:15, CO 31.439.18-20, CTS II.232.

76 e.g.: Ep. 3317, CO 18.317: Calvin to Admiral Coligny, [1561], Bonnet IV.165; Ep. 3314, CO 18.312: Calvin to the King of Navarre (1561), Bonnet IV.162.

77 Ep. 3232, CO 18.158: Calvinus Radzivilio (1560), C.N.T.C. Acts 1.1-8.

78 Ep. 3435, CO 18.544: Calvin à James Stuart (1561), Bonnet IV.200.

79 Ep. 3664, CO 19.201: Calvin au Roi de Navarre (1561), Bonnet IV.247.

80 Ep. 2316, CO 15.810: Calvin aux Fidèles de France (1555), Bonnet III.233; Ep. 2782, CO 16.748: Calvinus Ecclesiae Cuidam Gallicae (not in Bonnet).

81 Ep. 2118, CO 15.435: Calvin à l'église de Poitiers (1555), Bonnet III.148.

82 Ep. 2787, CO 17.9: Calvin aux frères de Dieppe (1558), Bonnet III.395.

83 Beza: Ep. 3663, CO 19.197: Calvin à la Reine de Navarre (1561), Bonnet IV.245. Fornelet: Ep. 3381, CO 18.439: Calvin aux Ministres de Neuchatel (1561), Bonnet IV. de Passy: Ep. 3702, CO 19.263: Calvin à M. de Passy (1562), Bonnet IV.255. des Gallars: Ep. 3199, CO 18.88: Calvinus Grindallo (1560), Bonnet IV.101. Lismann: Ep. 2110, CO 15.424: Calvinus Bullingeri (1555), Bonnet III.132. à Lasko: Ep. 2744, CO 16.673, Calvinus Utenhovie [1557] (not in Bonnet).

On the other hand, 'nothing hinders the progress of the Kingdom of Christ so much as the paucity of ministers'.⁸⁴

In remarks such as these, Calvin has in mind the ordinary ministry of the Church. Just as it was by the preaching of the Gospel that the Kingdom of Christ was inaugurated by the apostles, so it is by the preaching of the Gospel that it makes progress until it attains its consummation. At this level Calvin certainly believed the Church of his own day to be participating in an experience typical of the Church throughout the period between the two advents of Christ. In another sense, however, he considered his own age to stand in a particularly direct relationship to that of the apostles and prophets. He believed that Christ's Kingdom had degenerated to such an extent in the sixteenth century that it could only be restored by a fully apostolic ministry. Although the offices of apostles, prophets and evangelists

'were not established in the Church as permanent ones, but only for that time during which churches were to be erected where none existed before... the Lord has nevertheless sometimes at a later period raised up apostles, or at least evangelists in their place, as has happened in our own day'.⁸⁵

Under these circumstances, as Dankbaar has put it, 'reformation too was an apostolic work.... For Calvin, reformation was mission'.⁸⁶

The progress of the Kingdom of Christ and Christendom

From the earliest days, the reformers have been criticised for a failure to engage in the propagation of Christ's Kingdom beyond the boundaries of Christendom. In a remark directed particularly against Lutherans, but which he would certainly have thought equally applicable to Calvinists, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine declared that

'Heretics are never said to have converted either pagans or Jews to the faith, but only to have perverted Christians... But although they have a very large number of Jews living among them, and in Poland and Hungary have the Turks as their near neighbours, they have hardly converted even so much as a handful'.⁸⁷

Calvin certainly professed the desire 'to see the Kingdom of Christ flourish everywhere',⁸⁸ yet is it impossible to escape the fact that Calvin's efforts to propagate it were, in practice, devoted exclusively to western Europe.

84 Ep. 3737, CO 19.328: Calvinus Bullingeri (1562), Bonnet IV.263.

85 Inst. IV.iii.4, p 1057; OS V.46.23-28.

86 Dankbaar, p 349.

87 *Controversiae*, Book IV, C12 (C. Mirbt: *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums*; 4th. edition, J. C. Mohr, Tübingen 1924, p 362.) Cited in S. Neill: *A History of Christian Missions*; Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth 1964, p 221.

88 CO 15.428, Ep. 2118 (1555), Bonnet III.134.

Calvin and the missionary expedition to Brazil

The single piece of evidence that Calvin's concern for the progress of the Kingdom of Christ extended beyond the borders of Europe is the much-vaunted 'Calvinist' expedition to Brazil, in 1556-58.⁸⁹

In 1555, a French Protestant colony was established in some islands off Brazil, under the jurisdiction of Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon. Some of the earliest settlers (who included a group of deportees from France) proved unruly, and in early 1556, with the support of Admiral Coligny, Villegagnon wrote to the church in Geneva asking them to provide 'at once, ministers of the Word of God, and with them numerous other persons "well instructed in the Christian religion" in order to reform him and his people more effectively, and "to bring the savages to the knowledge of their salvation"'. After 'first giving thanks to God for this extension of Christ's Kingdom in such a faraway land',⁹⁰ the church in Geneva responded swiftly.

'Pierre Richier and Guillaume Charretier were elected to minister to the new islands which the French have conquered. They were commended to the care of the Lord and sent off with a letter from this church'.⁹¹

With a dozen laymen from the city, the pastors left Geneva in September 1556; they later sailed from France, and arrived in Brazil in March 1557.⁹² Initially, Villegagnon received the missionaries warmly, and letters written by the colonists in April indicate that a difficult missionary task was being undertaken with considerable dedication. Thus, having explained the frustrations which he and his colleagues were facing, Richier concludes, for example, that,

'Since the Most High has given us this duty, we expect this Edom to be a future possession of Christ'.⁹³

His hopes were not realised. Under pressure from both Roman Catholics among the colonists and the Cardinal de Lorraine in France, Villegagnon first withdrew his support from the Genevans (at Pentecost 1557), and then actively opposed them.⁹⁴ Most were able to escape back to France, having left Brazil in January 1558; but three were killed by Villegagnon for their confession of faith.⁹⁵

It is important not to exaggerate the extent of Calvin's involvement and interest in this episode. Dankbaar speaks of his 'intense participation in this missionary enterprise', and suggests that when 'a door was opened by de

89 The fullest account of the episode remains the article by R. P. Beaver, 'The Genevan Mission to Brazil', in J. H. Bratt ed., *The Heritage of John Calvin*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1973. A contemporary record of the mission is the 1557 *Journal de Bord de Jean de Léry en la terre de Brésil*. References to this work are to the 1957 edition published in Paris, edited by M.-R. Mayeux.

90 de Léry, p 52.

91 *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs de Geneve au temps de Calvin*, Tome 11, 1553-1564, eds. R. M. Kingdon and J.-F. Bergier, Librairie Droz, Geneva 1962, p 68.

92 de Léry, p 53, p 57, p 103.

93 Ep. 2609, CO 16.434.42-44.

94 de Léry, p 123, p 130.

95 de Léry, p 166, p 200.

Villegagnon's expedition, the reformer immediately sought to gain access by it'.⁹⁶ This overstates the case. The proposal that the Church in Geneva should send pastors to the colony was initially made not by Calvin, but by Coligny and Villegagnon. On the other hand, contrary to Beaver's assertion that he had gone to Frankfort at this time,⁹⁷ Calvin was in Geneva when the letters from Villegagnon and Coligny requesting assistance arrived in the city. He left for Frankfort the day after Richier and Charretier were elected as ministers by the Company of Pastors, and it was only their departure which was reported to Calvin by des Gallars as a *fait accompli*.⁹⁸ Thus, although it is a mistake to suggest (as Dankbaar does) that when he heard about the forthcoming expedition Calvin seized the initiative, it can fairly be said that, when 'confronted with a challenge to undertake mission, the church in Geneva responded immediately', and also that 'the circumstantial evidence points to Calvin's approbation'.⁹⁹

Calvin and the Turks

The question remains whether, impelled by this notion of the progress of Christ's Kingdom, Calvin was always alert for such opportunities to extend its borders 'to the ends of the earth'. His attitude to the Turks suggests not.

Calvin was acutely aware of the danger posed to the stability of Christian Europe in the mid-sixteenth century by the powerful Ottoman Empire to its east. The siege of Vienna in particular (1529) made a lasting impression on his mind. References to the Turks are scattered through his writings, but occur especially often in his lectures on the Prophets, in a context which is revealing. In these expositions, Calvin only ever perceives the Turks as a threat. He interprets their military victories as evidence of God's judgement on the Church,¹⁰⁰ and equates the relation of the Turks to Christian Europe with the relation of, for example, the Egyptians of Isaiah's day to the people of Israel. They threaten the dependence of God's people on divine protection, by offering an alternative source of aid.¹⁰¹ The recent Franco-Turkish treaties will end in disaster.¹⁰² It is in relation to the Turks that Calvin is at his most nationalistic, and he construes contact between the French and 'the heathen' entirely in negative terms: the Turks corrupt the French.¹⁰³ Calvin's stance is scarcely more positive in the 1559 *Institutes*. If he accepts the possibility that a Turk might be baptised, it is with reluctance.¹⁰⁴ To Calvin's mind, the Turks, (with the Papists and the Jews), were members of an unholy trinity. He never raised the possibility that contact between Christians and Turks might be of benefit to the Turks within the providence of God, and it certainly seems

96 Dankbaar, p 353.

97 Beaver, p 62.

98 *Annales*, CO 21.647; R. C. P. II.68; Ep. 2530, CO 16.279.

99 Beaver, p 72.

100 Comm. Isa 36.20, CO 36.613.24-30, CTS III.99.

101 Comm. Isa. 30.1, CO 36.508.35-44, CTS II.349.

102 Comm. Jer. 13.21, CO 38.1-10, CTS II.188.

103 Comm. Isa. 30.1, CO 36.506.23-25, CTS II.345.

104 Inst. IV.xvi.24, p 1347; OSV. 329.24.

PETE WILCOX *Evangelisation in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin* never to have occurred to him to see the proximity of the Turks as an evangelistic opportunity.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the distinctive feature of the concept of the Kingdom of Christ as it appears in Calvin's expositions of the Prophets, is the way that it provides a framework for the exposition of salvation history. From the perspective of the sixteenth century, Calvin can look back at the inauguration of the Kingdom, and forward to its consummation; and between these two points, he can chart its inexorable progress. This emphasis on the progress of Christ's Kingdom, which is absent from the *Institutes* represents a genuinely missionary aspect to Calvin's theology.

It has also been shown that Calvin identifies the Kingdom of Christ with the visible Church, or rather with the institution of the true Church, which is the reformed Church. The true Church is both a hearing and a speaking Church, deriving both form and function from the Word of God. Calvin takes the progress of Christ's Kingdom to be equivalent to the progress of the reformed Church. Both are propagated by the preaching of the Gospel. It is to be borne in mind that Calvin's lectures were delivered to students at the Academy, many of whom were sent as pastors to the nascent reformed Church in France. His correspondence with these pastors, as well as with leading lay people and others outside France, reveals that he perceived them to be engaged in the propagation of Christ's Kingdom.

It may be true that, at a strictly theoretical level, the progress of Christ's Kingdom in Calvin's understanding of it was destined to extend, quite literally, to the ends of the earth. In spite of its failure, and in spite of the limited nature of his own involvement, the expedition to Brazil illustrates that Calvin's theology was able to support missionary enterprises beyond the borders of Europe. In practice, however, the progress of Christ's Kingdom was equivalent for Calvin himself to the progress of the reformation in Europe. His interest was in the afflictions of the Church in Europe.¹⁰⁵ Oberman has written, '*Europa afflicta* designates the perimeters of his geographical concerns'.¹⁰⁶ Calvin himself was sufficiently aware of this, to argue that the term 'the earth' did not always mean literally 'the whole world', even for the prophets. For them it sometimes meant 'the known world', 'just as today, when we speak of what happens in the world, we hardly ever venture beyond Europe... [which] may be said to be our world'.¹⁰⁷

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105 *Afflicta est Europa*. Comm. Isa. 9.10, CO 36.202.18, CTS I.319.

106 H. A. Oberman, '*Europa Afflicta*: The Reformation of the Refugees', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 83 (1992), pp 91-111, p 102.

107 Comm. Isa. 24.1, CO 36.399.22-27, CTS II.166.