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Calvin's Preaching and Homiletic: Nine Engagements

Part 2

Peter Adam

In Part One we saw that the key to Calvin's preaching was that he engaged with God who was present in the sermon, that he engaged with the 'texts' or books of the Bible in expository preaching, that he engaged with theology, and engaged his own humanity in his preaching.

In Part Two we will find that Calvin also engaged with the congregation, and with them as hearers, engaged them in training and in God's global gospel plan, and engaged in raising up future preachers.

5. Engage with the congregation in the sermon

For Calvin ministry preaching should be contextual, contemporary, engaged with the congregation. Timeless truths, remote Biblicism, disengaged ministry, or unapplied preaching are unsatisfactory.

Many people would like me to preach with my eyes closed, not considering where I live, or in what locale, or in what time. As if those whose responsibility it is to proclaim God's message did not proceed the way it was done in the time of the apostles—as if the prophets did not apply the law of Moses to their day and time, as if the apostles did not follow the same practice!¹

For Calvin: 'Doctrine without zeal is either a sword in the hand of a lunatic, or lies cold and useless and serves a perverse ostentation.'² God accommodates himself to us in Christ, in the Scripture, and in providing human preachers and teachers.³

For it would be a cold way of teaching, if the teachers do not carefully consider the needs of the times and what is appropriate to the people, for in this matter nothing is more unbalanced than absolute balance.⁴

As van der Walt comments: 'Calvin's style of exegesis as revealed in his sermons is true homiletical exegesis, which means that it is not simply exposition but exposition and application.'⁵ Application must be clearly expressed:

We rightly divide the word of God when we give such lessons as the hearers are able to bear, and each one received a portion that he or she is able to receive. It is like a father feeding his children, when he gives each on the right amount.⁶

God accommodates to us through preachers, for ‘imparting too much would only result in loss’.⁷ Yet it is the task of preachers to challenge their hearers, ‘it is the duty of a good teacher to be always moving higher, until perfection has been reached’.⁸

Calvin knew that the right use of language was essential:

And so it came to pass in Papistry...that the Holy Scripture became as it were a strange language, which men call Divinity, not as doctrine common to all God’s family, but as a craft or science for a few only. For what is true divinity? That which our Lord would have common to all his children both to small and great...⁹

For the Bible was addressed in the most part to the people of God, and God expected the ordinary believers at Rome, at Corinth, at Thessalonica and Ephesus to be theologians, able to understand the Scriptures, as he had expected his people in Moab to receive Moses’ preaching.¹⁰

Calvin used familiar and colloquial language. ‘We always labour to make the Scriptures familiar, so that we may know that it is God who speaks to us’.¹¹ Calvin used the persuasive power of the Bible texts, including vivid contrasts, language and imagery.¹² T. F. Torrance commented that Calvin used ‘a mode of *persuasion* which throws the reader back upon the truth itself and its inherent validity’.¹³

His homiletic was a comprehensive appeal to the mind, emotions, memory, will, and actions.¹⁴ Blair Reynolds wrote—

Thus, Calvin’s goal in preaching is far more than merely expressing the cognitive characteristics of faith in order to ensure doctrinal purity, although he is often interpreted that way. Rather, his is essentially the aesthetic-affective quest to lure the congregation to greater depth and breadth of feeling. Although we are accustomed to defining Calvin as a theologian, this definition is too limiting; he was also a very talented artist and actor.¹⁵

Brevard Childs described Calvin's ability to relate the message of the Bible to his own time as 'one of the most impressive aspects of Calvin's interpretation of Scripture'.¹⁶

Calvin had what his publisher Conrad Badius described as the gift of prophecy.

It exists for the purpose of clearly understanding and purely expounding to God's people the holy Scripture according to its *vray et naturel sens* and of understanding how to apply it properly to one's own time and in accordance with those with whom one has to do.¹⁷

This came out of his daily personal and pastoral engagement with his people. His contemporary Colladon described Calvin's life and ministry as follows.

Calvin for his part did not spare himself at all, working far beyond what his powers and regard for his health could stand...He never failed in visiting the sick, in private warning and counsel, and the rest of his numberless matters arising out of the ordinary exercise of his ministry.¹⁸

Effective, contextual and transformative preaching only comes about through sustained ministry with people. Skills are no substitute for loving understanding and insight.

6. Engage with the congregation as hearers

One of the great traps for conscientious preachers is that they prepare full notes or texts of their sermons, but that these are designed to be read, not heard. They are in 'essay' style, which is designed to be read, and is very difficult to hear read! Spoken language is very different to written language, because reading is very different to hearing.

Calvin recognized the need for different styles of verbal communication. He had three styles of published writing, each with its intended purpose, genre and audience. The first was his theological writing, most notably *The Institutes*. Here he addressed the universal church and responded to its issues. The genre was dense explanation of an outline of theological topics. The second style was exposition of the Bible texts in his Commentaries, which were his lectures to students or ministers in written form. These were also intended for the universal church. These two were originally in Latin, though Calvin then translated them into French.

The third style was that of his sermons. These were in vernacular French, oral in style, addressed to the congregations at Geneva, and responded to their issues. The genre was exposition and application of books of the Bible. They were originally intended to be heard, rather than read, and were addressed to his own congregation. However from 1549 his sermons were systematically recorded by shorthand and then published. Badius commented, that at first '[Calvin] desired that his sermons should not extend further than his pastorate, both because they were preached especially for his sheep, to whose capacity he accommodated himself as best he could.'¹⁹ Later Calvin agreed to their publication for a wider audience. So sermons designed to be heard by the church at Geneva then became available for the wider people of God.

We have much to learn from Calvin the preacher. Calvin had a specific style of communication in his sermons.²⁰ He identified with the congregation. One striking feature of his homiletic was that he used 'we' and 'us', rather than 'I' and 'you'.

When we come to a sermon, if we do not understand all that is spoken to us, let us wait and, in the meanwhile, honour our God and reverence him in the things that are too high for our understanding to reach to.²¹

This meant that he and the congregation were joint recipients of God's words. This promoted solidarity with the congregation. He did this too when he used corporate monologue, in which he meditated with the congregation on shared experiences and struggles. He also articulated the instinctive responses that he knew people would have to the Scriptures.²² So when he preached on giving to those in need, he added our common excuses—

Thus we say, 'Oh, I'll do that some other time, for if I give all away today, tomorrow when I am approached, I will have nothing left! It is best if I keep this for myself.'²³

He applies the Bible to the whole congregation, including himself.

But since he has gathered into his flock, and united us in his name, and since we call upon him with one voice as our Father, we must show brotherly love to one another.²⁴

Calvin's preaching style was designed to be heard, not read: it was for ears, not eyes. He had a rhetoric that he used for *The Institutes*²⁵ and different oral rhetoric for his sermons. He preached to be heard, and usually preached for

between 40 and 60 minutes.²⁶ He opposed grandiloquence that obscured the text, personal 'inspiration' that bypassed it, and misusing the text and so profaning it.²⁷

7. Engage the congregation in training

Calvin preached not only to convert and transform, but also to train the congregation. This aspect of preaching is not always present, and churches suffer as a result.

i. *Receive God's words in sermons*

Some of Calvin's congregation were eager to hear his preaching; others he still had to win over many to accept this model of ministry, and the Scriptures that he taught. So he had to train the congregation to hear sermons and to honour preachers. The wise believer will welcome the ministry of the preachers. To hear the preacher is to hear Christ: '[F]or it is the will of Christ to exercise his ministry as Prophet by the mouths of those whom he ordains to be ministers among the faithful.'²⁸

When so much had changed in church buildings, the pulpit remained:

So the pulpit...has prominent place in the church building...so that the teaching which comes from the mouth of the preacher may be received with greater reverence, and everyone submit to it.²⁹

Calvin wanted to train his people to hear God's words in sermons.

ii. *Calvin wanted to train ordinary people to read the Bible.*³⁰

Calvin's aim was to ensure that lay people read and understood the Bible:

When, therefore, we see that there are people from all classes making progress in God's school, we acknowledge His truth which promised a pouring out of his spirit on all flesh.³¹

This represented one of the most significant changes achieved by the Reformation, for before the Reformation, as Calvin wrote to Cardinal Sadoletto—

Among the people themselves, the highest veneration paid to the Word was to revere it at a distance, as a thing inaccessible, and abstain from all investigation of it.³²

He trained lay people to assess what they heard by the Scriptures for—

no doctrine is worth believing except as we perceive it to be based in the Scriptures...which makes it all the clearer that individuals are called to read the Scriptures.³³

The need for ordinary believers to know their Bibles is even more evident when we see Calvin's expectations in terms of their ministries of the Word. In his sermons, he trained a ministry team which included all the laity.

iii. *Teach and convert others*

In his 'Reply to Sadoleto,' Calvin wrote, 'It certainly is the part of the Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul.' So Christians are to serve others, not just in ordinary matters of daily life, but also in sharing words of eternal life.

Although not all have the office of Preaching the word of God, yet a private person who is a member of the church may beget spiritual children to God if he has the occasion and ability to win a poor soul and enlighten him with the faith of the gospel.³⁶

He also warned of failing to take those opportunities:

But when most people see that God provides an opening for them and a way to instruct the uninformed, they will remain silent, keep their mouths shut, and not say a word...He will be guilty of other people's sin because he had the means to admonish them and did not.³⁷

So Christians are to know their Bibles, and be trained and active in teaching and exhorting others.

iv. *Serve God in the world*

The congregation must learn to serve God in the world, by doing good works of daily work and voluntary service.

So therefore it becomes every man to apply his vocation in such a way that he may do all he can for his neighbours...we must be ready to do all good works.³⁸

To care for others is to express true and godly humanity.

Since [God] has stamped his image upon us, and since we share a common nature, this ought to inspire us to provide for one another. The one who seeks to be exempt from the care of his neighbour is disfiguring himself and declaring that he no longer wishes to be a man. For whilst we are human

beings, we must see our own faces reflected, as in a mirror, in the faces of the poor and despised...even if they are people who are most alien to us.³⁹

The best good works include our daily tasks of, 'digging earth...sewing and tailoring,'⁴⁰ for by these we honour God and benefit our neighbours.

8. Engage the congregation in taking part in God's global gospel plan

Calvin wanted the church in Geneva to have a global gospel vision, to take part in a strategy to convert the world to Christ in their own day, and also to make provision for gospel ministry in the future. For, 'God places no higher value on anything than the preaching of the gospel for he wants his kingdom to be dominant in this world, and preaching is the way to lead men to salvation.'⁴¹ And the church in Geneva should work with God: 'To draw the world to God and to build up the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ that he may rule among us.'⁴² And all believers have this responsibility:

For the knowledge of God must be known through the whole world, and every one must share in it, and we must take pains to bring all that wander. And we must think not only of our own time, but also of the time after our death...we must labour to make God known throughout the whole world.⁴³

The gospel will go to the world as churches are planted, and godly ministers are provided:

The gospel cannot be maintained without the means of which Paul speaks, that there be ministers appointed in every town, for the means to maintain the church is by preaching...which is the incorruptible seed by which we are born of God, it is the milk of little children, and food of the great ones. So the Church cannot but decay and perish unless it be maintained by the preaching of the word of God.⁴⁴

What are the implications of this? Firstly, that civil and church leaders should take great care in the selection and appointment of ministers.⁴⁵ Secondly that people should think strategically and sacrificially of the need for good ministers: 'But men have so little care to serve God and his Church, that no man would have his son be a Preacher.'⁴⁶

The congregation also needed to be conscious of the need to training preachers, and what kind of preparation was appropriate. This was important for their

support of their preachers, and for those who were thinking of becoming teachers or pastors.

9. Engage in training up future preachers

Calvin wanted to train people to recognize the significance of the ministry of preaching, and he also wanted to train up future preachers. This process began in the church, and was completed in the Academy. Future preachers were formed by present sermons.

All this sets high standards for preachers, who need to engage with the texts of Scripture, know how to help their congregations engage with God, how to think theology, and how to love and serve people. Here are some of the requirements God places on preachers.⁴⁷

Chose out the ablest in the world, yet they must acknowledge that they cannot speak of God with such majesty and reverence, unless God govern them and give them new speech, altering and reforming their tongues so that they may not speak after the manner of men but may show that it is the Holy Spirit who rules them.⁴⁸

Preachers must be rigorous in orthodoxy, zealous in ministry, with a desire to honour God, and to be an example to their people:

The first thing that is required of those whom God send to preach his word is that they continue in pure doctrine, not ending in falsehoods or going astray from true religion, but maintaining true uprightness. It is not enough for us to teach people faithfully, unless we have a zeal to edify and care for the salvation of all, and do this with a desire to honour God and show the way, and be an example to those we lead.⁴⁹

They must be able to do public and private ministry of the Word:

And then, when a man will be a preacher, it is not just a question of making a sermon, but it is necessary for him to proclaim the Word of God both publicly and privately in order to edify, so that the word may be profitable.⁵⁰

Preachers must be students of God's word: 'No man shall ever be a good minister of God's word unless he first be a student of it.'⁵¹ They must be able to teach and preach: 'For though a man walk uprightly and have great and excellent virtues, yet if he does not teach, he may be a good Christian, but he is no Minister.'⁵²

They must be willing to face hardship and suffering: ‘not only diligent and indefatigable in pursuing the task of teaching, but...ready to undergo the danger of death for the defence of the doctrine.’⁵³ They must be able to rebuke sin: ‘When the word of God is rightly applied, then there must be conflict and war against all vices...So our Lord will have his word rightly applied.’⁵⁴ They must know how to serve people: ‘We cannot serve God except by serving his people.’⁵⁵ They must avoid arrogance: ‘One of the greatest virtues of those who have the charge of governing the Church and preaching the Word of God, is that they guard themselves from being puffed up and have a foolish arrogance which carries them away.’⁵⁶ They must be resilient enough to face the opposition of the world and of Satan: ‘they cannot preach the word of God, but Satan on the one side will do what he can to hinder them, and the world will be in an uproar.’⁵⁷

They must know what condemnation they face if they betray their trust:

If private people who run riot against God are worthy to be condemned, then [ministers of the gospel] who do this are rightly called devils. Jesus Christ called them so in the person of Judas. So therefore those who are called to so honourable an office should take heed to themselves, because God has chosen them in his service.⁵⁸

Preachers must use their gifts to serve others, not themselves:

Let them not seek to be esteemed for their brave babbling and lofty speech, for their subtleties, for the fine and sharp wits, for the passing bravery: all these things must be laid under foot, or else we can never serve God and his Church.⁵⁹

They must realize the privilege and responsibility they carry:

All they to whom God has appointed to be Ministers of his word must realize that as the keys of the kingdom are committed to them, so they must keep this treasure so that it does not perish.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Certainly Calvin set a high standard for preachers. While one may be gifted in bring people to meet God, in reading and communicating texts, in thinking theologically, in working with people, and in training, it is rare for any one person to have all these gifts. The lesson is not that sermon preparation is hard work, though it is, but that preachers need to undergo rigorous and demanding

preparation for their ministries, and need to maintain the equivalent standards throughout their ministries.

Calvin did not always meet the high standards that he set for himself.⁶¹ His sermon on 1 Timothy 3:16 loses the shape and content of the text and focuses entirely on the topic of the divinity and humanity of Christ.⁶² His usual pattern was to preach from 4-8 verses. This works well in texts that are theologically dense, but in extensive narratives it is less successful, as the momentum of the text is lost because he divides up the units of meaning. In his series on Job, he cannot avoid the idea that after all Job must have sinned, and so favours Elihu that he is taken to speak as a Reformed believer.⁶³ Preaching from a Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke, as Calvin did for his Sunday sermons from 1559-1564 was not the best way to present those three distinct texts. Yet it seems petty to throw stones, when Calvin preached so faithfully and effectively, and when he helped to set the standards by which we might now judge him. If we want to find a good model of preaching, we will not imitate Calvin's style in *The Institutes*, or in the Commentaries, but the style of his sermons.

The creator and focus of preaching is God, the purpose is the conversion, transformation and training of the congregation, and the two means are the Scriptures and the preacher. May God raise up such able preachers for our church and our world.

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ENDNOTES

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