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Prejudice dies hard; and there are few figures around whom prejudice has accumulated more tenaciously than that of John Calvin. There are still many churchmen today who (though in this much-vaunted ecumenical era ought to know better) use the word "Calvinist" as an ecclesiastical term of abuse or a theological swear-word. We are repeatedly assured that missionary or evangelistic activity was entirely incompatible with the character of John Calvin both as a man and as a theologian.

PHILIP E. HUGHES

Faith is . . . a warm embrace, of Christ, by which he dwells in us, and we are filled with the Divine Spirit.

JOHN CALVIN

JOHN CALVIN'S MISSIONARY INFLUENCE IN FRANCE

Michael A. G. Haykin

It has often been maintained that the sixteenth-century Reformers had a poorly developed missiology, that missions was an area to which they gave little thought. Yes, this argument runs, they rediscovered the apostolic gospel, but they had no vision to spread it to the uttermost parts of the earth. It is considered axiomatic that the Reformers had no concern for overseas missions to non-Christians and that they evidence no recognition at all of the missionary dimension of the church.

But such a characterization is far from the truth. In what follows, one reformer in particular, the Frenchman John Calvin (1509-1564), has been selected to show the error of this perspective.[1] John Calvin's theology of missions is developed by looking first at the theme of the victorious advance of Christ's kingdom that looms so large in his writings. Statements from Calvin regarding the means and motivations for extending this kingdom are then examined to further show Calvin's concern for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Finally, there is a brief look at the way Calvin's Geneva functioned as a missionary center.

THE VICTORIOUS ADVANCE OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM[2]

A frequent theme in Calvin's writings and sermons is that of the victorious advance of Christ's kingdom in the world. God the Father, Calvin says in his prefatory address to Francis I in his theological masterpiece, the *Institutes of*

the Christian Religion, has appointed Christ to "rule from sea to sea, and from the rivers even to the ends of the earth." In a sermon on 1 Timothy 2:5-6, Calvin notes that Jesus came, not simply to save a few, but "to extend his grace over all the world." Similarly, Calvin declares in a sermon on Acts 2 that the reason for the Spirit's descent at Pentecost was in order for the gospel to "reach all the ends and extremities of the world."

It was this global perspective on the significance of the gospel that also gave Calvin's theology a genuine dynamism and forward movement. It has been said that if it had not been for the so-called Calvinist wing of the Reformation many of the great gains of that era would have died on the vine. While this may be an exaggeration to some degree, it does illustrate the importance of the Reformed perspective.[3]

Calvin, moreover, was not satisfied to be involved in simply reforming the church. He was tireless in seeking to make the influence of the church felt in the affairs of the surrounding society and thus make God's rule a reality in that area of human life as well. It was this conviction that led Calvin to be critical of the Anabaptists, the radical left-wing of the Reformation. From his perspective, the Anabaptist creation of communities that were totally separate from the surrounding culture was really a misguided attempt to flee the world. Their spiritual forbears were medieval monks, not the early Christians who had been obedient to Christ's words in Matthew 28:19-20. In Calvin's view, they should be seeking positive ways in which they could be used by the indwelling Spirit to impact society in general and reform it, and so advance the kingdom of Christ.

MEANS FOR THE EXTENSION OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM

Calvin is quite certain that the extension of Christ's kingdom is first of all God's work. Commenting on Matthew 24:30, he can assert that it is not "by human means but by

heavenly power . . . that the Lord will gather his Church."[4] Or consider his comments on the phrase "a door having also been opened to me" in 2 Corinthians 2:12.

> [The meaning of this metaphor] is, that an opportunity of promoting the gospel had presented itself. For as an opportunity of entering is furnished when the *door is opened*, so the servants of the Lord make advances when an opportunity is presented. The *door is shut*, when no prospect of usefulness is held out. Now as, on the door being shut, it becomes us to enter upon a new course, rather than by farther efforts to weary ourselves to no purpose by useless labour, so where an opportunity presents itself of edifying, let us consider that by the hand of God a door is opened to us for introducing Christ there, and let us not withhold compliance with so kind an indication from God.[5]

For Calvin, the metaphor of an "open door" spoke volumes about the way in which the advance of the church is utterly dependent on the mercy of a Sovereign God.

Now, this does not mean that Christians are to be passive in their efforts to reach the lost and can sit back and wait for God to do all. In his comments on Isaiah 12:5 Calvin deals with this common misinterpretation of God's divine sovereignty.

> [Isaiah] shows that it is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation. While we exhort and encourage others, we must not at the same time sit down in indolence, but it is proper that we set an example before others; for nothing can be more absurd than to see lazy and slothful men who are exciting other men to praise God.[6]

As David Calhoun rightly observes: "The power to save [souls] rests with God but he displays and unfolds his sal-

vation in our preaching of the gospel."[7] While missions and evangelism are indeed God's work, he delights to use his people as his instruments.

One vital way in which God uses his people for the conversion of others is through prayer—our prayers for the conversion of unbelievers. We see this conviction at work in Calvin's own prayers, a good number of which have been recorded for us at the end of his sermons. Each of his sermons on Deuteronomy, for instance, ends with a prayer that runs something like this: "may it please him [i.e., God] to grant this [saving] grace, not only to us, but also to all peoples and nations of the earth."[8]

Moreover, Calvin would admonish believers not to be discouraged if they do not see fruit immediately issuing as a result of their prayers. As he states in his comments on Genesis 17:23:

> So, at this day, God seems to enjoin a thing impossible to be done, when he requires his gospel to be preached every where in the whole world, for the purpose of restoring it from death to life. For we see how great is the obstinacy of nearly all men, and what numerous and powerful methods of resistance Satan employs; so that, in short, all the ways of access to these principles are obstructed. Yet it behooves individuals to do their duty, and not to yield to impediments; and, finally, our endeavours and our labours shall by no means fail of that success, which is not yet apparent.[9]

Believers, then, must actively employ their strength to bring God's salvation to others. In his *Sermon on Deuteronomy* 33:18-19 Calvin can thus argue that it is not enough to be involved in God's service. Christians need to be drawing others to serve and adore God.[10]

Specifically, how does God use the strength of Christians? Calvin's answer is that it is by their words and by

their deeds. Given Calvin's high appreciation of the Word of God one would naturally expect that this would be seen as a major means of witness. Thus, Calvin can state that whenever the Old Testament prophets foretold "the renewal of the Church or its extension over the whole globe," they always assigned "the first place to the Word."[11] Acting on this conviction, Calvin encouraged the translation and printing of the Scriptures in the work of Reformation in Geneva. This also explains his own devotion to regular expository preaching and his penning of commentaries on all of the books of the New Testament (except for 2 and 3 John, and Revelation), and on a goodly number of Old Testament books.

But witness is borne not only by the Word, but also by our deeds. Calvin had established an academy in Geneva to train men to be missionaries for his native land, France. A large number of these men did indeed go back as missionaries and some died as martyrs. To five such missionaries who had been arrested at Lyons and were facing death by martyrdom, Calvin wrote on May 15, 1553:

> Since it pleases him [i.e., God] to employ you to the death in maintaining his quarrel [with the world], he will strengthen your hands in the fight, and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain. And though the fruit may not all at once appear, yet in time it shall spring up more abundantly than we can express. But as he hath vouchsafed you this privilege, that your bonds have been renowned, and that the noise of them has been everywhere spread abroad, it must needs be, in despite of Satan, that your death should resound far more powerfully, so that the name of our Lord be magnified thereby. For my part, I have no doubt, if it please this kind Father to take you unto himself, that he has preserved you hitherto, in order that your long-continued imprisonment might serve as a preparation for the better awakening of those whom he has determined to edify by

> your end. For let enemies do their utmost, they never shall be able to bury out of sight that light which God has made to shine in you, in order to be contemplated from afar.[12]

Here, Calvin sees the act of martyrdom as a powerful witness for the gospel, though it is one without words.

Calvin is also convinced that each and every Christian must be prepared to witness, by both word and deed, about God's grace and mercy in Christ and that to all whom they can. When it comes to the spreading of the gospel, it is noteworthy that he makes no distinction between the responsibility of pastors and of other Christians. All believers must be involved.[13]

There is one means that Calvin expected God to use in the spread of the gospel that we today in the West probably do not expect, i.e., evangelism through Christian rulers and magistrates. For example, when Elizabeth I came to the throne of England, he saw it as a hopeful sign for the advance of the gospel in England. Over the years he also corresponded extensively with a number of French noblewomen, especially Jeanne d'Albret (1528-1572), queen of Navarre. This French noblewoman played a significant role in the French Reformation, and Calvin recognized his need of her support, and that of other nobility, if new territories were to be opened up to the spread of the evangelical faith.

MOTIVATIONS FOR EXTENDING CHRIST'S KINGDOM

What was to motivate the believer in bearing witness to the faith? First and foremost was the glory of God. As Calvin stated in his *Sermon on Deuteronomy* 33:18-19: "When we know God to be our Father, should we not desire that he be known as such by all? And if we do not have this passion, that all creatures do him homage, is it not a sign that his glory means little to us?"[14]

In other words, if we are truly passionate about God's

glory, this passion will result in witness.

Moreover, bearing witness to the faith is pleasing to God. Consider in this regard Calvin's letter to a Christian landowner on the island of Jersey that was written around the year 1553:

> We praise God for having inclined your heart to try if it will be possible to erect, by your means, a small church on the place where you reside. And indeed, according as the agents of the Devil strive by every act of violence to abolish the true religion, extinguish the doctrine of salvation, and exterminate the name of Jesus Christ, it is very just that we should labour on our side to further the progress of the gospel, that, by these means, God may be served in purity, and the poor wandering sheep may be put under the protection of the sovereign Pastor to whom every one should be subject. And you know that it is a sacrifice well pleasing to God, to advance the spread of the Gospel by which we are enlightened in the way of salvation, to dedicate our life to the honour of him who has ransomed us at so costly a price in order to bear rule in the midst of us.[15]

Then we are to evangelize because we have been commanded to do so by Christ.[16] Compassion for the lost condition of people also should drive Christians to witness. "If we have any humanity in us," he declared in a sermon on Deuteronomy 33, "seeing men going to perdition, . . . ought we not be moved by pity, to rescue the poor souls from hell, and teach them the way of salvation?"[17] In fact, a Christian who is not involved in witness is really a contradiction in terms. As Calvin remarks in his *Commentary on Isaiah* 2:3:

> The godly will be filled with such an ardent desire to spread the doctrines of religion, that every one not satisfied with his own calling and his personal knowledge will desire to draw

> others along with him. And indeed nothing could be more inconsistent with the nature of faith than that deadness which would lead a man to disregard his brethren, and to keep the light of knowledge choked up within his own breast.[18]

GENEVA AS A MISSIONARY CENTER

Geneva was not a large city. During Calvin's lifetime it reached a peak of slightly more than 21,000 by 1560, of whom a goodly number were religious refugees.[19] Nevertheless, it became *the* missionary center of Europe in this period of the Reformation. Calvin sought to harness the energies and gifts of many of the religious refugees so as to make Geneva central to the expansion of Reformation thought and piety throughout Europe. This meant training and preparing many of these refugees to go back to their native lands as evangelists and reformers.

Understandably Calvin was vitally concerned about the evangelization of his native land, France, and his countrymen, the French. It has been estimated that by 1562 some 2,150 congregations had been established in France with around two million members, many of them converted through the witness of men trained in Geneva.[20] But Calvin was concerned for not only France, but also for the reformation of the church in places like Scotland and England, Spain, as well as Poland, Hungary, and the Netherlands. He even encouraged a mission to Brazil in 1555, which turned out, though, to be a failure.[21]

To further this work of Reformation evangelism, there was also need for Christian literature and the Scriptures. In fact, by Calvin's death, his interest in Christian publishing meant that there were no less than thirty-four printing houses in Geneva, with an annual printing capacity of around 300,000 books. This included Bibles in various European languages, like the *Geneva Bible*, the bedrock of early English Puritanism.

Geneva's missionary vision for Europe thus had a deep impact on the European continent. Little wonder Calvin could write: "When I consider how very important this corner [i.e., Geneva] is for the propagation of the kingdom of Christ, I have good reason to be anxious that it should be carefully watched over."[22]

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Notes

1. David B. Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, 5:1 (Spring 1979),17.
2. The first three quotes are cited by Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," 17.
3. Jean-Marc Berthoud, "John Calvin and the Spread of the Gospel in France" in *Fulfilling the Great Commission* (Westminster Conference Papers; [London]: Westminster Conference, 1992), 44-46.
4. Cited by Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," 18.
5. *Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 2:12.
6. *Commentary* on Isaiah 12:5.
7. "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," 18.
8. Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," 19, n. 23.
9. *Commentary* on Genesis 17:23.
10. *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18-19 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited by William Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss (*Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. 57; Brunswick, 1885 ed.; reprint, New York/London: Johnson reprint Corporation/Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, G.m.b.H., 1964), 29:175].

11. Cited by Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," 22.
12. *Letter* 318 [in *Letters of John Calvin*. Edited by Jules Bonner and translated by Mr. Constable (1858 ed.; repr. New York: Lenox Hill Pub. & Dist. Co., 1972), II, 406].
13. Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," 22.
14. *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18-19 (*Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, 29:175).
15. *Letter* 339 (*Letters*, II. Edited by Bonnet, 453).
16. Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," 20.
17. *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18-19 (*Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, 29:175).
18. *Commentary* on Isaiah 2:3.
19. Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford, United Kingdom/Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990), 121.
20. W. Stanford Reid, "Calvin's Geneva: A Missionary Centre," *The Reformed Theological Review*, 42:3 (September-December, 1983), 69.
21. See the story of this important mission in Amy Glassner Gordon, "The First Protestant Missionary Effort: Why Did It Fail?," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 8:1 (January 1984), 12-18.
22. *Letters*, II. Edited by Bonnet, 227.