

Michael A.G. Haykin

“A SACRIFICE WELL PLEASING TO GOD”:
JOHN CALVIN AND THE MISSIONARY ENDEAVOR OF THE CHURCH¹

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.

Possibly the very first author to raise the question about early Protestantism's failure to apply itself to missionary work was the Roman Catholic theologian and controversialist, Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621). Bellarmine argued that one of the marks of a true church was its continuity with the missionary passion of the Apostles. In his mind, Roman Catholicism's missionary activity was indisputable and this supplied a strong support for its claim to stand in solidarity with the Apostles. By contrast, Bellarmine maintained:

¹ The bulk of this article first appeared in the online journal *Reformation21*, 13 (September 2006).

In this one century the Catholics have converted many thousands of heathens in the new world. Every year a certain number of Jews are converted and baptized at Rome by Catholics who adhere in loyalty to the Bishop of Rome... The Lutherans compare themselves to the apostles and the evangelists; yet though they have among them a very large number of Jews, and in Poland and Hungary have the Turks as their near neighbors, they have hardly converted so much as a handful.²

Now, what is interesting is that many more recent authors have accepted Bellarmine's argument and taken it as a given that Martin Luther, Huldreich Zwingli, John Calvin and their followers had no missiological convictions.

But such a characterization is far from the truth. First of all, in the earliest decades of the Reformation no major Protestant domain had access to the sea, possessed significant naval power, or had any immediate prospect of a maritime empire.³ The Roman Catholic kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, the acknowledged leaders among missionary-sending regions at this time, had all of these. It is noteworthy that Catholic nations of Europe, such as Poland and Hungary, that also lacked these sea-going capabilities, evidenced no more foreign missionary concern at that time than

² Robert Bellarmine, *Controversiae*, Book IV as quoted in Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (2nd ed.; London: Penguin, 1986), 189.

³ Kenneth Stewart, ...

did Lutheran Saxony or the Zurich of Zwingli. Therefore, it was not the case that every Catholic nation was committed to foreign missions whereas no Protestant territory was so committed.

Second, it is vital to recognize that, as Scott Hendrix has wonderfully shown, the Reformation was the attempt “make European culture more Christian than it had been. It was, if you will, an attempt to reroot faith, to rechristianize Europe.”⁴ In the eyes of the Reformers, this program involved two accompanying convictions. First, they considered what passed for Christianity in late mediaeval Europe as sub-Christian at best, pagan at worst. As Calvin put it in his *Reply to Sadoletto* (1539):

The light of divine truth had been extinguished, the word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion, and the pastoral office subverted. Meanwhile, impiety so stalked abroad that almost no doctrine of religion was pure from admixture, no ceremony free from error, no part, however minute, of divine worship untarnished by superstition.⁵

Second, the Reformers viewed their task as a missionary one: they were planting true Christian churches.⁶ In what follows, the missiology of the French Reformer John Calvin (1509-1564)

4 “Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization”, *Church History*, 69 (2000), 561.

5

6 Hendrix, “Rerooting the Faith”, 558-568.

clearly shows the error of the perspective that the Reformation was by and large a non-missionary movement.⁷

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.
2. Statements from Calvin regarding (a) the means and (b) 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.
3. Finally, there is a brief look at the way Calvin's Geneva functioned as a missionary center.

*The victorious advance of Christ's Kingdom*⁸

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

⁷ David B. Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure", *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, 5, No.1 (Spring 1979), 17.

⁸ The first three quotes are cited by Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure", 17.

even to the ends of the earth.” The reason for the Spirit’s descent at Pentecost, Calvin notes further in a sermon on Acts 2, was in order for the gospel to “reach all the ends and extremities of the world.” In a sermon on 1 Timothy 2:5-6, one of a series of sermons on 1 Timothy 2, Calvin underlines again the universality of the Christian faith: Jesus came, not simply to save a few, but “to extend his grace over all the world.”

From that same sermon series, Calvin can thus declare that “God wants his grace to be known to all the world, and he has commanded that his gospel be preached to all creatures; we must (as much as we are able) seek the salvation of those who today are strangers to the faith, who seem to be completely deprived of God’s goodness.”⁹ 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 rightly 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.¹⁰

⁹ *Sermon 13* on 1 Timothy 2:8. For this quote, I am indebted to Elsie McKee, “Calvin and Praying for ‘All People Who Dwell on Earth’”, *Interpretation*, 63 (2009), 134.

¹⁰ 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.

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."¹¹ 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 labor, 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.¹²

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.

¹¹ Cited Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure", 18.

¹² *Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 2:12.

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.¹³

As David Calhoun rightly observes: "The power to save [souls] rests with God but He displays and unfolds His salvation in our preaching of the gospel."¹⁴ While missions and evangelism are indeed God's work, he delights to use his people as his instruments.

The first major way in which God uses his people for the conversion of others is through prayer—our prayers for the conversion of unbelievers.¹⁵ In Calvin's words, God "bids us to pray for the salvation of unbelievers"¹⁶ and Scripture passages like 1 Timothy 2:4 encourage us not to "cease to pray for all people in

13 *Commentary* on Isaiah 12:5.

14 "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure", 18.

15 In this regard, see the masterful essay by McKee, "Calvin and Praying", 130-140, *passim*.

16 Cited McKee, "Calvin and Praying", 133.

general.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸

And the liturgy that Calvin drew up for his church in Geneva, there is this prayer:

We pray you now, O most gracious God and merciful Father, for all people everywhere. As it is your will to be acknowledged as the Saviour of the whole world, through the redemption wrought by Your Son Jesus Christ, grant that those who are still estranged from the knowledge of him, being in the darkness and captivity of error and ignorance, may be brought by the illumination of your Holy Spirit and the preaching of your gospel to the right way of salvation, which is to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.¹⁹

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:

¹⁷ Cited McKee, “Calvin and Praying”, 138.

¹⁸ Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure”, 19, n.23; McKee, “Calvin and Praying”, 139-140.

¹⁹ Cited McKee, “Calvin and Praying”, 139.

So, at this day, God seems to enjoin a thing impossible to be done, when he requires his gospel to be preached everywhere 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 endeavors and our labors shall by no means fail of that success, which is not yet apparent.²⁰

Then, believers 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.²¹

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

²⁰ *Commentary* on Genesis 17:23.

²¹ *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18-19 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, eds. William Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss (*Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. 57; Brunswick, 1885 ed.; repr. New York/London: Johnson reprint Corporation/Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, GmbH, 1964), 29:175]. Trans. author.

the whole globe”, they always assigned “the first place to the Word.”²² 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. Preaching is also central here, as Calvin notes: “God wants his grace to be known in all the world, and he has commanded that his gospel be preached to all people.”²³

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

22 Cited Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure”, 22.

23 Cited McKee, “Calvin and Praying”, 134.

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.²⁴

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.²⁵

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.

²⁴ *Letter 318* [in Jules Bonnet, ed., *Letters of John Calvin*, tr. Mr. Constable (1858 ed.; repr. New York: Lenox Hill Pub. & Dist. Co., 1972), II, 406].

²⁵ Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure", 22.

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?²⁶

In other words, if we are truly passionate about God's glory, this passion will result in witness.

²⁶ *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18-19 (*Ioannis Calvinii Opera*, 29:175). Trans. author.

Moreover, bearing witness to the faith is pleasing to God. Consider in this regard Calvin's letter to a Christian landowner on 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 labor 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 everyone 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 honor of him who has ransomed us at so costly a price in order to bear rule in the midst of us.²⁷

Then, we are to evangelize because we have been commanded to do so by Christ.²⁸

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

²⁷ *Letter 339* (Bonnet, ed., *Letters*, II, 453).

²⁸ Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure", 20.

hell, and teach them the way of salvation?”²⁹ As Calvin said on one occasion: “Let a Moor or a Barbarian come among us, and yet inasmuch as he is a man, he brings with him a looking glass wherein we may see that he is our brother and neighbor.”³⁰

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 everyone 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.³¹

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.³² 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

29 *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18-19 (*Ioannis Calvini Opera*, 29:175). Trans. author.

30 Calvin’s sermon on Galatians 6:9–11 in *Sermons of M. Iohn Caluine vpon the Epistle of Saincte Paule to the Galathians*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1574), 331, spelling modernized.

31 *Commentary on Isaiah 2:3*.

32 Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford,

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 2 million members, many of them converted through the witness of men trained in Geneva.³³ That 2 million comprised 50% of the upper and middle classes, and a full 10% of the entire population. The growth is enormous when one reckons that at the time of Calvin's conversion, there were probably no more than 3,000 or 4,000 Evangelicals in France.

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

UK/Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), 121.

³³ W. Stanford Reid, "Calvin's Geneva: A Missionary Centre", *The Reformed Theological Review*, 42, No.3 (September-December, 1983), 69.

encouraged a mission to Brazil in 1555, which turned out, though, to be a failure.³⁴

A colonizing expedition to Brazil was being led by a Frenchman, a certain Nicholas de Villegagnon.³⁵ The Genevan church was asked to provide French-speaking ministers and some colonists to join the expedition. The missionary possibilities were clear to the leaders of the Genevan church. Contemporary chronicler (and participant in the expedition) Jean de Léry recorded that “Upon ...hearing this news, the church of Geneva at once gave thanks to God for the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ in a country so distant and likewise so foreign and among a nation entirely without the knowledge of the true God.”³⁶

The church was further helped in deciding to support the matter when it received correspondence from Gaspard de Coligny, who

34 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, No.1 (January 1984), 12-18. See also G. Baez-Camargo, “The Earliest Protestant Missionary Venture in Latin America”, *Church History*, 21 (1952), 135-145.

35 Some details about Villegagnon are provided in G. Baez-Camargo, ‘The Earliest Protestant Missionary Venture in Latin America’, *Church History*, 21 (1952), No. 2, 135 and Amy Glassner Gordon, ‘The First Protestant Missionary Effort: Why Did it Fail?’ in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 8 (1984), no. 1, 12, 13.

36 Jean de Léry, *Journal de Bord de Jean de Léry en la Terre de Brésil 1557, présenté et commenté par M.R. Mayeux* (Paris, 1957) as quoted in R. Pierce Beaver, ‘The Genevan Mission to Brazil’ in John Bratt, ed. *The Heritage of John Calvin*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 61. Portions of the de Léry *Journal* appeared in English dress as “Journey to the Land of Brazil, 1557.” In *The Manners, Lawes, and Customes of All Nations, Collected out of the Best Writers*, by Joannes Boemus. 1610. trans. Ed Aston, (London: G. Eld, 1611), 483-502.

was Admiral of France³⁷ and who had been converted through Calvin's correspondence. Coligny encouraged Calvin and the Genevan pastors to supply ministers. Two ministers were chosen, Pierre Richier and Guillaume Chartier, who were commissioned to go in the company of carpenters, a leatherworker, a cutler, and a tailor. As a part of a group of 300, they reached the island colony (called Fort Coligny) in March 1557.³⁸

Villegagnon, the colonial governor, had determined that the colony should establish itself on an island off the Brazil coast. But it lacked both sources of fresh water and native inhabitants. Since interaction with the natives was the key to obtaining adequate food supplies and to any missionary possibilities, this island location seemed very disadvantageous. Interaction with the Indian population, when it came, proved difficult; the Genevan pastors were initially taken aback at the barbarism of the people they now met. But they adopted the long-term strategy of placing boys from the colony among the Indians so that, with time, they would have the services of bilingual translators.³⁹ One of the colonists, the chronicler Levy, spent extensive time among the on-shore native population and wrote up extensive observations about their

37 As Admiral, de Coligny was responsible for naval and maritime ventures.

38 Beaver, op. cit. 62

39 Beaver, 64

manners, customs and religious ideas. His work has been termed an attempt at missionary ethnography.⁴⁰

Religious differences soon surfaced. Villegagnon seems to have been unprepared for the degree of religious diversity which the arrival of the Francophone Protestants would represent and disputes broke out about Catholic-Protestant doctrinal differences. The governor made it his business to hinder the ability of the Genevan Calvinists to proselytize among the at-least-nominally Catholic French colonists. In the course of time, Villegagnon exiled the Genevan pastors to the mainland, where their exposure to the Indian population continued until the time when they and other Genevans were forcibly returned by the governor to France. At best, we can say that the short interlude of missionary opportunity among the natives of Brazil provided the Geneva contingent with a seedbed for further thinking and reflection about cross-cultural mission.⁴¹ In fairness, we should be able to grant that the Genevans seized this modest missionary opportunity when it was offered to them.

⁴⁰ Gordon *The First Protestant Missionary Effort*, 14

⁴¹ Gordon, 16

Also need to note that Calvin and the Genevan pastors helped further the work of Reformation evangelism in Europe through print media. In fact, by Calvin's death, his interest in Christian publishing meant that there were no less than 34 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."⁴²

⁴² *Letters*, II, 227.