

The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin, The Man and His Preaching

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A Profound Sense of God

In 1538, the Italian Cardinal Sadolet wrote to the leaders of Geneva trying to win them back to the Catholic Church after they had turned to the Reformed teachings. He began his letter with a long conciliatory section on the preciousness of eternal life, before coming to his accusations against the Reformation. Calvin wrote a response to Sadolet in six days in the fall of 1539. It was one of his earliest writings and spread his name as a reformer across Europe. Luther read it and said, "Here is a writing which has hands and feet. I rejoice that God raises up such men."¹

Calvin's response to Sadolet is important because it uncovers the root of Calvin's quarrel with Rome that determined his whole life. The issue is not, first, justification or priestly abuses or transubstantiation or prayers to saints or papal authority. All of these were important for Calvin. Beneath all of them, the fundamental issue for John Calvin, from the beginning to the end of his life, was the issue of the centrality and supremacy and majesty of the glory of God.

Calvin responded to the Cardinal as follows: "[Your] zeal for heavenly life [is] a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to *sanctify the name of God.*" In other words, even precious truth about eternal life can be so skewed as to displace God as the center and goal. And this was Calvin's chief contention with Rome. It comes out in his writings

over and over again. He goes on and says to Sadolet that what he should do—and what Calvin aims to do with all his life—is to "set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, *zeal to illustrate the glory of God.*"²

I think this would be a fitting banner over all of John Calvin's life and work—*zeal to illustrate the glory of God.* The essential meaning of John Calvin's life and preaching is that he recovered and embodied a passion for the absolute reality and majesty of God. Benjamin Warfield said of Calvin, "No man ever had a profounder sense of God than he."³ This is the key to Calvin's life and theology.

The Glory of God

Geerhardus Vos, the Princeton New Testament scholar, asked the question in 1891, "What is it about Reformed theology that enables that tradition to grasp the fullness of Scripture unlike any other branch of Christendom?" He answers, "Because Reformed theology took hold of the Scriptures in their deepest root idea.... This root idea which served as the key to unlock the rich treasuries of the Scriptures was *the preeminence of God's glory in the consideration of all that has been created.*"⁴ It is this relentless orientation on the glory of God that gives coherence to John Calvin's life and to the Reformed tradition that followed. Vos said that the "all-embracing slogan of the Reformed faith is this: the work of grace in the sinner as a *mirror for the glory of God.*"⁵ Mirroring the glory of God is the meaning of John

Calvin's life and ministry.

When Calvin did eventually get to the issue of justification in his response to Sadolet, he said, "You ... touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us.... Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, *the glory of Christ is extinguished.*"⁶ So here again you can see what is fundamental. Justification by faith is crucial. But there is a deeper root reason why it is crucial. The glory of Christ is at stake. Whenever the knowledge of justification is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished. This is always the root issue for Calvin: What truth and what behavior will "illustrate the glory of God"?

For Calvin, the need for the Reformation was fundamentally this: Rome had "destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways—by calling upon the saints to intercede, when Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man; by adoring the Blessed Virgin, when Christ alone shall be adored; by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass, when the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross is complete and sufficient,"⁷ by elevating tradition to the level of Scripture and even making the word of Christ dependent for its authority on the word of man.⁸ Calvin asks, in his *Commentary on Colossians*, "How comes it that we are 'carried about with so many strange doctrines' (Hebrews 13:9)?" And he answers, "Because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us."⁹ In other words, the great guardian of Biblical orthodoxy throughout the centuries is a passion for the glory and the excellency of God in Christ. Where the center shifts from God, everything begins to shift everywhere. Our indifference to God does not bode well for doctrinal faithfulness in our own non-God-centered day.

Therefore, the unifying root of all of Calvin's labors is his passion to display the glory of God in Christ. When he was 30 years old, he described an imaginary scene of himself at the end of his life, giving an account to God, and said, "The thing [O God] at which I chiefly aimed, and for which I most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice ... might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ ... might be fully displayed."¹⁰

Twenty-four years later, unchanged in his passions and goals, and one month before he actually did give an account to Christ in heaven (he died at age 54), he said in his last will and testament, "I have written nothing out of hatred to any one, but I have always faithfully propounded what I esteemed to be *for the glory of God.*"¹¹

So I ask the question, What happened to John Calvin to make him a man so mastered by the majesty of God? And what kind of ministry did this produce in his life?

Calvin's Conversion

We must consider the key event of his conversion soon after he was 21 years old. He was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France, when Martin Luther was 25 years old and had just begun to teach the Bible in Wittenberg. We know almost nothing of his early home life. When he was fourteen his father sent him to study theology at the University of Paris, which at that time was untouched by the Reformation in Germany and steeped in Medieval theology. Five years later (when Calvin was nineteen) his father ran afoul of the church and told his son to leave theology and study law, which he did for the next three years at Orleans and Bourges.

During these years Calvin mastered Greek, and was immersed in the thought of Duns Scotus and William Occam and Gabriel Biel, and he completed his law course. His father died in May of 1531, when Calvin was 21. Calvin felt free then to turn from law to his first love, which had become the classics. He published his first book, a *Commentary on Seneca*, in 1532, at the age of 23. Sometime during these years he came into contact with the message and the spirit of the Reformation, and by 1533 his life changed dramatically.

In November, 1533, Nicholas Cop, a friend of Calvin, preached at the opening of the winter term at the University of Paris, and was called to account by the Parliament for his Lutheran-like doctrines. He fled the city, and a general persecution broke out against what King Francis I called “the cursed Lutheran sect.” Calvin was among those who escaped. The connection with Cop was so close that some suspect Calvin actually wrote the message that Cop delivered. So by 1533 Calvin had crossed the line. He was wholly devoted to Christ and to the cause of the Reformation.

What happened? Calvin recounts, seven years later, how his conversion came about as he struggled to live out the Catholic faith with zeal,

... when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountain ... to its original purity. Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted ... to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error.... I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, [a very key phrase, in view of what we will see] in what a sty of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution

and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen ... as in duty bound, [I] made it my first business to betake myself to thy way [O God], condemning my past life, not without groans and tears.¹²

He describes the resolution of this struggle in the following: “God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame.... Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress.”¹³

What was the foundation of Calvin’s faith that yielded a life devoted utterly to displaying the glory and majesty of God? I believe the answer is that Calvin suddenly, as he says, saw and tasted in Scripture the majesty of God. And in that moment, both God and the Word of God were so powerfully and unquestionably authenticated to his soul, that he became a loving servant of God and his Word for the rest of his life.

The Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit

How this happened is extremely important, and we need to see Calvin himself describe it in the *Institutes*, especially Book I, Chapters VII and VIII. Here he wrestles with how we can come to a saving knowledge of God through the Scriptures. His answer is the famous phrase, “the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.” For example, he says, “Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit” (I, viii, 13). So two things came together for Calvin to give him a “saving knowledge of God”—Scripture and the “inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit.”

But how does the witness of the Spirit actually work? What does the Spirit do? The answer is not that the Spirit gives us added revelation to what is in Scripture¹⁴ but that he awakens us, as from the dead, to see and taste the divine reality of God in Scripture, which authenticates it as God's own Word. He says, "Our Heavenly Father, revealing his majesty [in Scripture], lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy" (I, viii, 13). There is the key for Calvin: the witness of God to Scripture is the immediate, unassailable, life-giving revelation to the mind of the majesty of God manifest in the Scriptures.

Over and over again in his description of what happens at conversion you see his references to the majesty of God revealed in Scripture, and vindicating Scripture. So already in the dynamics of his conversion the central passion of his life is being ignited.

We are almost at the bottom of this experience now. If we go deeper we will see more clearly why this conversion resulted in such an "invincible constancy" in Calvin's lifelong allegiance to the majesty of God and the truth of God's Word. Here are the words that will take us deeper:

Therefore illumined by [the Spirit's] power, we believe neither by our own [note this!] nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men (I, vii, 5).

This is almost baffling. He says that his conviction concerning the majesty of God in Scripture rests not in any human judgment, not even his own. What does he

mean? As I have wrestled with this, the words of the apostle John have shed the most helpful light on what Calvin is trying to explain. Here are the key words from 1 John 5:7-11:

And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is the truth.... If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God [= the Spirit] is greater; for the witness of God is this, that He has borne witness concerning His Son.... The witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.

In other words the "witness of God," that is, the inward witness of the Spirit, is greater than any human witness—including, I think John would say in this context, the witness of our own judgment. And what is that witness of God? It is not merely a word delivered to our judgment for reflection, for then our conviction would rely on that reflection. What is it then? Verse 11 is the key: "The witness is this: that God has given us eternal life." I take that to mean that God witnesses to us of his reality and the reality of his Son and his Word by giving us life from the dead so that we come alive to his majesty and see him for who he is in his Word. In that instant we do not reason from premises to conclusions; we see that we are awake, and there is not even a prior human judgment about it to lean on. When Lazarus wakened in the tomb by the call or the "witness" of Christ he knew without reasoning that he was alive and that this call awakened him.

Here is the way J. I. Packer puts it:

The internal witness of the Spirit in John Calvin is a work of enlightenment whereby, through the medium of verbal testimony, the blind eyes of the spirit are opened, and divine realities come to be recognized and

embraced for what they are. This recognition Calvin says, is as immediate and unanalyzable as the perceiving of a color, or a taste, by physical sense—an event about which no more can be said than that when appropriate stimuli were present it happened, and when it happened we know it had happened.¹⁵

So in his early twenties John Calvin experienced the miracle of having the blind eyes of his spirit opened by the Spirit of God. And what he saw immediately, and without any intervening chain of human reasoning, were two things, so interwoven that they would determine the rest of his life: the majesty of God and the Word of God. The Word mediated the majesty and the majesty vindicated the Word. Henceforth he would be a man utterly devoted to displaying the majesty of God by the exposition of the Word of God.

Calvin's Early Ministry

What form would his ministry take? Calvin knew what he wanted. He wanted the enjoyment of literary ease to promote the Reformed faith as a scholar.¹⁶ The scholar's life, Calvin believed, suited his nature, but God had radically different plans.

After escaping from Paris and finally leaving France entirely, he spent his exile in Basel, Switzerland between 1534 and 1536. To redeem the time "he devoted himself to the study of Hebrew."¹⁷ In March of 1536, he published the first edition of the *Institutes*, which would go through five enlargements before reaching its present form in 1559. We should not think that this was a merely academic exercise. Years later he tells us what was driving him:

But lo! while I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France.... It appeared to me, that unless I opposed [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.... It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed.¹⁸

So when you hold the *Institutes* of John Calvin in your hand, remember that theology, for John Calvin, was forged in the furnace of burning flesh, and that Calvin could not sit idly by without some effort to vindicate the faithful and the God for whom they suffered.

In 1536 France gave a temporary amnesty to those who had fled. Calvin returned, put his things in order and left, never to return, taking his brother Antoine and sister Marie with him. He intended to go to Strasbourg and continue a life of peaceful literary production. But he wrote later to a friend, "I have learned from experience that we cannot see very far before us. When I promised myself an easy, tranquil life, what I least expected was at hand."¹⁹ A war between Charles V and Francis I resulted in troop movements that blocked the road to Strasbourg, and Calvin had to detour through Geneva. In retrospect one marvels at the providence of God that he arranges armies in order to position his pastors.

The night that he stayed in Geneva, William Farel, the fiery leader of the Reformation in that city, found out he was there and sought him out. It was a meeting that changed the course of history, not just for Geneva, but for the world. Calvin

tells us what happened in his preface to his commentary on Psalms:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.²⁰

The course of his life was changed irrevocably. Not just geographically, but vocationally. Calvin never again worked in what he called the “tranquility of studies.” From now on, every page of the forty-eight volumes of books and tracts and sermons and commentaries and letters that he wrote would be hammered out on the anvil of pastoral responsibility.

He took up his responsibilities in Geneva first as Professor of Sacred Scripture, and within four months was appointed Pastor of St. Peter’s church—one of the three parishes in the 10,000-person town of Geneva.

The City Council was not altogether happy with Farel or Calvin because they did not bow to all their wishes. So the two of them were banished in April 1538. Calvin breathed a sigh of relief and thought God was relieving him from the crush of pastoral duties so he could focus on his studies. But when Martin Bucer found out about Calvin’s availability, he did the same thing to get him to Strasbourg that Farel had done to get him to Geneva. Calvin wrote, “that most excellent servant of Christ, Martin Bucer,

employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse, before, drew me back to a new station. Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching.”²¹ That is, he agreed to go to Strasbourg and teach. In fact, for three years Calvin served as the pastor to about 500 French refugees in Strasbourg, as well as teaching New Testament. He also wrote his first commentary, on Romans, and published the second enlarged edition of the *Institutes*.

Perhaps the most important providence during this three-year stay in Strasbourg was finding a wife. Several friends tried to get Calvin a wife. He was 31 years old and numerous women had shown interest. Calvin had told his friend and matchmaker William Farel what he wanted in a wife: “The only beauty which allures me is this—that she be chaste, not too nice or fastidious, economical, patient, likely to take care of my health.”²² Parker comments, “Romantic love ... seems to have had no place in his character. Yet prosaic wooing led to a happy marriage.”²³ I think Parker was wrong about romantic love (see below on Idelette’s death). But the prosaic wooing was directed toward an Anabaptist widow named Idelette Stordeur who had joined Calvin’s congregation with her husband Jean. In the spring of 1540, Jean died of plague and on August 6, 1540, Calvin and Idelette were married. She brought a son and daughter with her into Calvin’s home.

Calvin’s Return to Geneva

Meanwhile back in Geneva, chaos was causing the city fathers to reconsider their actions in regard to Calvin and Farel. They decided that Calvin and Farel were not so bad after all. On May 1, 1541, the City

Council rescinded the ban on Calvin and even held him up as a man of God. This was an agonizing decision for Calvin, because he knew that life in Geneva would be full of controversy and danger. Earlier in October he said to Farel that though he preferred not to go, “yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord.”²⁴ This became Calvin’s motto and the picture on his emblem included a hand holding out a heart to God with the inscription, *prompte et sincere* (“promptly and sincerely”).

On Tuesday, September 13, 1541, he entered Geneva for the second time to serve the church there until his death on May 27, 1564. His first son, Jacques, was born July 28, 1542, and died two weeks later. He wrote to his friend Viret, “The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son. But He is Himself a Father and knows best what is good for his children.”²⁵ This is the kind of submission to the sovereign hand of God Calvin rendered in all of his countless trials.

Idelette was never well again. They had two more children who also died at or soon after birth. Then on March 29, 1549, Idelette died of what was probably tuberculosis. Calvin wrote to Viret,

You know well how tender, or rather soft, my mind is. Had not a powerful self-control been given to me, I could not have borne up so long. And truly, mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordained, would have willingly shared not only my poverty but even my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. She was never troublesome to me throughout the whole course of her illness, but was more anxious

about her children than about herself. As I feared these private worries might upset her to no purpose, I took occasion three days before she died, to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty towards her children.²⁶

Calvin never remarried. And it is just as well. The pace he kept would not have left much time for wife or children. His acquaintance, Colladon, who lived in Geneva during these years describes his life:

Calvin for his part did not spare himself at all, working far beyond what his power and regard for his health could stand. He preached commonly every day for one week in two [and twice on every Sunday, or a total of about 10 times every fortnight]. Every week he lectured three times in theology.... He was at the *Consistoire* on the appointed day and made all the remonstrances.... Every Friday at the Bible Study ... what he added after the leader had made his *declaration* was almost a lecture. He never failed in visiting the sick, in private warning and counsel, and the rest of the numberless matters arising out of the ordinary exercise of his ministry. But besides these ordinary tasks, he had great care for believers in France, both in teaching them and exhorting and counseling them and consoling them by letters when they were being persecuted, and also in interceding for them.... Yet all that did not prevent him from going on working at his special study and composing many splendid and very useful books.²⁷

He was, as Wolfgang Musculus called him, “a bow always strung.” In one way he seemed to take heed to his health. Colladon says that “he was for many years with a single meal a day and never [took] anything between two meals....” His reasons were that the weakness of his stomach and his migraines could only be

controlled, he had found by experiment, by continual abstinence.²⁸ But on the other hand he was apparently careless of his health and worked night and day with scarcely a break. You can hear the drivenness in this letter to Falais in 1546: "Apart from the sermons and the lectures, there is a month gone by in which I have scarce done anything, in such wise I am almost ashamed to live thus useless."²⁹ A mere 20 sermons and 12 lectures in that month!

To get a clearer picture of his iron constancy, add to this work schedule the "continuous ill health"³⁰ he endured. He wrote to his physicians in 1564 when he was 53 years old, and described his colic, spitting of blood, ague, gout, and the "excruciating sufferings" of his hemorrhoids.³¹ But worst of all seemed to be the kidney stones that had to pass unrelieved by any sedative.

[They] gave me exquisite pain.... At length not without the most painful strainings I ejected a calculus which in some degree mitigated my sufferings, but such was its size that it lacerated the urinary canal and a copious discharge of blood followed. This hemorrhage could only be arrested by an injection of milk through a syringe.³²

On top of all this pressure and physical suffering were the threats to his own life. "He was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets."³³ On his deathbed Calvin said to the pastors gathered, "I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun]."³⁴ In a letter to Melancthon in 1558, he wrote that war was imminent in the region and that enemy troops could reach

Geneva within half an hour. "Whence you may conclude," he said, "that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity."³⁵

One of the most persistent thorns in Calvin's side were the Libertines in Geneva. But here too his perseverance was triumphant in a remarkable way. In every city in Europe men kept mistresses. When Calvin began his ministry in Geneva in 1536 at the age of 27, there was a law that said a man could keep only one mistress.³⁶ Even after Calvin had been preaching as pastor in St. Peter's church for over fifteen years, immorality was a plague, even in the church. The Libertines boasted in their license. For them the "communion of saints" meant the common possession of goods, houses, *bodies and wives*. So they practiced adultery and indulged in sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. And at the same time they claimed the right to sit at the Lord's table.³⁷

The crisis of communion came to a head in 1553. A well-to-do Libertine named Berthelier was forbidden by the Consistory of the church to eat the Lord's Supper, but appealed the decision to the Council of the City, which overturned the ruling. This created a crisis for Calvin who would not think of yielding to the state the rights of excommunication, nor of admitting a Libertine to the Lord's table.

The issue, as always, was the glory of Christ. He wrote to Viret, "I... took an oath that I had resolved rather to meet death than profane so shamefully the Holy Supper of the Lord.... My ministry is abandoned if I suffer the authority of the Consistory to be trampled upon, and extend the Supper of Christ to open scoff-

ers.... I should rather die a hundred times than subject Christ to such foul mockery.”³⁸

The Lord’s day of testing arrived. The Libertines were present to eat the Lord’s Supper. It was a critical moment for the Reformation in Geneva.

The sermon had been preached, the prayers had been offered, and Calvin descended from the pulpit to take his place beside the elements at the communion table. The bread and wine were duly consecrated by him, and he was now ready to distribute them to the communicants. Then on a sudden a rush was begun by the troublers in Israel in the direction of the communion table.... Calvin flung his arms around the sacramental vessels as if to protect them from sacrilege, while his voice rang through the building: “These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned, and dishonor the table of my God.” “After this,” says, Beza, Calvin’s first biographer, “the sacred ordinance was celebrated with a profound silence, and under solemn awe in all present, as if the Deity Himself had been visible among them.”³⁹

The point of mentioning all these woes in Geneva is to set in bold relief the invincible constancy of John Calvin in the ministry to which God had called him. We asked earlier, What happened to John Calvin to make him a man so mastered by the majesty of God? And what kind of ministry did this produce in his life? We answered the first part of that question by saying, Calvin experienced the supernatural inward witness of the Spirit to the majesty of God in Scripture. Henceforth, everything in his thinking and writing and ministry was aimed at illustrating the majesty and glory of God.

Calvin’s Exposition of Scripture

Now what is the answer to the second part of that question: what kind of ministry did it produce? Part of the answer has been given: it produced a ministry of incredible steadfastness—what I have called, using Calvin’s own words, “invincible constancy.”⁴⁰ But that is only half the answer. It was a ministry of unrelenting exposition of the Word of God. The constancy had a focus, the exposition of the Word of God.

Calvin saw the majesty of God in the Scriptures. This persuaded him that the Scriptures were the very Word of God. He said, “We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone, and has nothing of man mixed with it.”⁴¹ His own experience had taught him that “the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it.”⁴² These truths led to an inevitable conclusion for Calvin. Since the Scriptures are the very voice of God and since they are therefore self-authenticating in revealing the majesty of God, and since the majesty and glory of God are the reason for all existence, it follows that Calvin’s life would be marked by invincible constancy in the exposition of Scripture.

He wrote tracts, he wrote the great *Institutes*, he wrote commentaries (e.g., on the Pentateuch, Psalms, Isaiah and Joshua, and all the New Testament books except Revelation), he gave Biblical lectures (many of which were published as virtual commentaries) and he preached ten sermons every two weeks. But *all* of it was exposition of Scripture. Dillenberger said, “[Calvin] assumed that his whole theological labor was the exposition of Scripture.”⁴³ In his last will and testament he said, “I have endeavored, both in my ser-

mons and also in my writings and commentaries, to preach the word purely and chastely, and faithfully to interpret His sacred Scriptures.”⁴⁴

For Calvin the Scriptures were absolutely central because they were absolutely the Word of God and had as their self-authenticating theme the majesty and glory of God. Out of all these labors of exposition, preaching was supreme. Emile Doumergue, the foremost biographer of John Calvin with his six-volume life of Calvin, said, as he stood in the pulpit of John Calvin on the four hundredth anniversary of Calvin’s birth, “That is the Calvin who seems to me to be the real and authentic Calvin, the one who explains all the others: Calvin the preacher of Geneva, molding by his words the spirit of the Reformed of the sixteenth century.”⁴⁵

Calvin’s preaching was of one kind from beginning to end: he preached steadily through book after book of the Bible. He never wavered from this approach to preaching for almost twenty-five years of ministry in St. Peter’s church of Geneva—with the exception of a few high festivals and special occasions. “On Sunday he took always the New Testament, except for a few Psalms on Sunday afternoons. During the week ... it was always the Old Testament.”⁴⁶ The records show fewer than half a dozen exceptions for the sake of the Christian year. He almost entirely ignored Christmas and Easter in the selection of his text.⁴⁷

To give you some idea of the scope of Calvin’s pulpit, he began his series on the book of Acts on August 25, 1549, and ended it in March of 1554. After Acts he went on to the epistles to the Thessalonians (46 sermons), Corinthians (186 sermons), the Pastorals (86 sermons), Galatians (43 sermons), Ephesians (48 ser-

mons)—until May, 1558. Then there is a gap when he was ill. In the spring of 1559 he began the Harmony of the Gospels and was not finished when he died in May, 1564. During the week of that season he preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, 123 on Genesis and so on.⁴⁸

One of the clearest illustrations that this was a self-conscious choice on Calvin’s part is the fact that after preaching on Easter Day, 1538, he left the pulpit of St. Peter’s, banished by the City Council. He returned in September, 1541—over three years later—and picked up the exposition in the next verse.⁴⁹

Why this remarkable commitment to the centrality of sequential expository preaching? I will mention three reasons. They are just as valid today as they were in the sixteenth century.

First, Calvin believed that the Word of God was a lamp that had been taken away from the churches. He said in his own personal testimony, “Thy word, which ought to have shone on all thy people like a lamp, was taken away, or at least suppressed as to us.... And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but ... earnestly to supplicate thee not to judge according to [my] deserts that fearful abandonment of thy word from which, in thy wondrous goodness thou hast at last delivered me.”⁵⁰ Calvin reckoned that the continuous exposition of books of the Bible was the best way to overcome the “fearful abandonment of [God’s] Word.”

Second, according to Parker, Calvin had a horror of those who preached in the pulpit their own ideas. Calvin said, “When we enter the pulpit, it is not so that we may bring our own dreams and fancies with us.”⁵¹ He believed that by expounding Scriptures as a whole, he

would be forced to deal with all that God wanted to say, not just what he might want to say.

Third—and this brings us full circle to the beginning—Calvin saw the majesty of God in his Word. Calvin believed with all his heart that the Word of God was indeed the Word of *God*, and that all of it was inspired and profitable and radiant with the light of the glory of God. In Sermon 61 on Deuteronomy he challenges us:

Let the pastors boldly dare all things *by the word of God*.... Let them constrain all the power, glory, and excellence of the world to give place to and to obey *the divine majesty of this word*. Let them enjoin everyone by it, from the highest to the lowest. Let them edify the body of Christ. Let them devastate Satan's reign. Let them pasture the sheep, kill the wolves, instruct and exhort the rebellious. Let them bind and loose thunder and lightning, if necessary, *but let them do all according to the word of God*.⁵²

The key phrase here is “the divine majesty of this word.” This was always the root issue for Calvin. How might he best show forth the divine majesty for Geneva and Europe and all of history? He answered with a life of continuous expository preaching. There would be no better way to manifest the full range of the glories of God and the majesty of his being than to spread out the full range of God's Word in the context of the pastoral ministry of shepherding care.

Conclusion

My own conviction is that this is why preaching remains a central event in the life of the church even 500 years after the printing press and the arrival of radio and television and cassettes and compact discs and computers. God's Word is mainly

about the majesty of God and the glory of God. Although the glory and majesty of God in his Word can be known in the still small voice of whispered counsel by the bedside of a dying saint, there is something in it that cries out for expository exultation. This is why preaching will never die. And radical, pervasive, God-centeredness will always create a hunger for preaching in God's people. If God is “I am who I am”—the great, absolute, sovereign, mysterious, all-glorious God of majesty whom Calvin saw in Scripture—there will always be preaching, because the more this God is known and the more this God is central, the more we will feel that he must not be merely analyzed and explained. God must be acclaimed and heralded and magnified with expository exultation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters* (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1909) 68.

² John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings* (Scholars Press, 1975) 89 (emphasis added).

³ Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 24.

⁴ Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 241-242 (emphasis added).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁶ Dillenberger, 95.

⁷ T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 109.

⁸ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, vii, 1: “A most pernicious error widely prevails

that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men!"

⁹ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 55.

¹⁰ Dillenberger, 110.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 114-115.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, "Calvin the Theologian," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 166: "Rejecting both the Roman contention that the Scripture is to be received as authoritative on the church's authority, and with it the idea that Scripture could be proved divinely authoritative by rational argument alone, Calvin affirms Scripture to be self-authenticating through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. What is this 'inner witness'? Not a special quality of experience, nor a new, private revelation, nor an existential 'decision,' but a work of enlightenment."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁶ Dillenberger, 86.

¹⁷ Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin* (1844; rpt., Milwaukee, Oregon: Back Home Industries, 1996) 21.

¹⁸ As cited in Dillenberger, 27 (taken from Calvin's preface to his commentary on the book of Psalms, vol. 1).

¹⁹ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 24.

²⁰ Dillenberger, 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 70.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴ W. de Greef, *The Writings of John*

Calvin: An Introductory Guide, translated by Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 38.

²⁵ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁷ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 62-63.

²⁸ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin, A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) 104.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (1577; rpt., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) viii.

³¹ Dillenberger, 78.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 29.

³⁴ Dillenberger, 42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁶ Parker, 29.

³⁷ Henderson, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁴⁰ In a sermon on Job 33:1-7, Calvin calls preachers to constancy: "When men so forget themselves that they cannot subject themselves to Him Who has created and fashioned them, it behooves us to have an *invincible constancy*, and to reckon that we shall have enmity and displeasure when we do our duty; yet nevertheless let us go through it without bending" (John Calvin, *Sermons from Job by John Calvin* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952] 245).

⁴¹ Quoted in Packer, 162.

⁴² *Institutes*, I, vii, 4.

⁴³ Dillenberger, 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Harold Dekker, "Introduction," *Sermons from Job by John*

Calvin, xii.

⁴⁶ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 82.

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, trans. by Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 8.

⁴⁸ For these statistics see Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 83, and de Greef, 111-112.

⁴⁹ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 60.

⁵⁰ Dillenberger, 115.

⁵¹ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 83.

⁵² Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, xii (emphasis added).