

# The Founders Journal



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RECONSIDERING  
CALVIN AND CALVINISM

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Cover Photo: Monument of John Calvin at the Reformers Wall in Geneva.

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# The Founders Journal

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# Reconsidering Calvin and Calvinism

*Tom Ascol*

**I**t is much easier to mock and ridicule John Calvin than it is to read him and seriously consider his insights in the light of Scripture. That is why today there is no shortage of disinformation about the man and his teachings. In some sectors of Christianity vilifying him has almost become a sport.

I well recall seminary professors who dismissed Calvin and his writings as irrelevant because, as they asserted, “he burned at the stake those who disagreed with him” or “he was an authoritarian tyrant who ruled Geneva with an iron fist” or “he baptized babies.” Further, students were warned against imbibing his theological insights lest we become like him in all of these ways.

Those accusations typify the conflation of myth and truth that fills the thoughts of many when they think of Calvin. Yes, he advocated paedobaptism, but he hardly ruled the city of Geneva, not even being granted citizenship until five years before his death. Regarding the death of the heretic Servetus, Calvin cannot be exonerated for his part in that sad, heinous act. But it is stupefyingly simplistic to overlook the fact that Calvin was a man of his times and his times were brutal.

Even today there are some Baptist leaders and teachers who seem intent on keeping caricatures of Calvin alive and whose warnings about the man and his doctrine border on the apocalyptic. These modern alarmists have little in common with the rich stream of Baptist heritage that viewed these matters in a completely different light. In his magisterial Baptist Encyclopedia William Cathcart numbers Calvin among “the greatest workers in Christ’s vineyard”<sup>1</sup> and the great Baptist champion, Charles Spurgeon, writes, “The doctrine which I preach is that of the Puritans: it is the doctrine of Calvin, the doctrine of Augustine, the doctrine of Paul, the doctrine of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>2</sup>

John Calvin was a great man. But he was just a man. To ignore him or dismiss him thoughtlessly is to waltz merrily down the path of ignorance not only of historical theology, but of western civilization. Thoughtlessly to accept all that he taught would be to dishonor him and, more importantly, the Scriptures that he loved and sought to expound.

One of the great benefits that we who live in this year of the 500th anniversary of his birth are receiving is the collective insight of fresh evaluations of the man and his teaching. This issue of the *Founders Journal* includes some of those evaluations.

The articles by Frank James and Michael Haykin should forever put to rest the false charge that Calvin's theology is inherently opposed to bold evangelism.<sup>3</sup> Erroll Hulse gives a wonderful summary of Calvin's Calvinism demonstrating the reformer's integrated understanding of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Spurgeon well-understood that to appreciate Calvin and Calvinism is not to denigrate the Word of God at all. Rather, it is to recognize that, to the degree that the man accurately understood and taught God's Word, he has served and continues to serve the people of God well.

In this assessment, Spurgeon speaks for many, including this writer:

We only use the term "Calvinism" for shortness. That doctrine which is called "Calvinism" did not spring from Calvin; we believe that it sprang from the great founder of all truth. Perhaps Calvin himself derived it mainly from the writings of Augustine. Augustine obtained his views, without doubt, through the Holy Spirit of God, from diligent study of the writings of Paul, and Paul received them from the Holy Ghost and from Jesus Christ, the great founder of the Christian Church. We use the term then, not because we impute an extraordinary importance to Calvin's having taught these doctrines. We would be just as willing to call them by any other name, if we could find one which would be better understood, and which on the whole would be as consistent with the fact.<sup>4</sup> ☺

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The Baptist Encyclopedia, ed. William Cathcart (Philadelphia, PA: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 365.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Early Years* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 364.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Van Neste also refutes that unwarranted but pernicious accusation in his excellent article "John Calvin on Evangelism and Missions" in *The Founders Journal* 33 (Summer 1998), 15–20.

<sup>4</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Early Years*, 162.

# Calvin the Evangelist

*Frank A. James III*

**T**here are many popular misconceptions about John Calvin. Who is the true Calvin behind the image?

Will Durant, the famous author of the eleven-volume series on the history of Western Civilization, said of Calvin: “We shall always find it hard to love the man, John Calvin, who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.” Even the defrocked TV evangelist, Jimmy Swaggart, has something to say about Calvin. “Calvin,” said Swaggart, “has caused untold millions of souls to be damned.” Such judgements, besides being uncharitable, fail to get at the real John Calvin—a man with a strong evangelical heart.

One of the most pervasive criticisms of Calvin is that he had no interest in missions. The well-known Protestant missiologist, Gustav Warneck, portrayed the Reformers, including Calvin, as missiologically challenged merely because they believed in predestination. “We miss in the Reformers, not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions... because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity and even their thoughts a missionary direction.”

**But history tells another story.** The city of Geneva, long associated with Calvin, was also an important refugee center in the Reformer’s day. Throughout sixteenth-century Europe, persecuted Protestants fled their homelands, many of whom found their way to Geneva. In the 1550s, the population of Geneva literally doubled.

One of those refugees who came to Geneva was the Englishman John Bale, who wrote: “Geneva seems to me to be the wonderful miracle of the whole world. For so many from all countries come here, as it were, to a sanctuary. Is it not wonderful that Spaniards, Italians, Scots, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, disagreeing in manners, speech, and apparel, should live so lovingly and friendly, and dwell together like a ... Christian congregation?”

Since Geneva was French-speaking, the vast majority of refugees came from France. As they sat under Calvin’s teaching in the Cathedral of St.

Pierre, the French refugees' hearts stirred for their homeland. Many of them felt compelled to return to France with the Protestant gospel.

Calvin, however, did not want to send uneducated missionaries back to the dangers of Catholic France. He believed that a good missionary had to be a good theologian first. And so he inspired and educated them. He trained them theologically, tested their preaching ability, and carefully scrutinized their moral character. Calvin and the Genevan Consistory sent properly trained missionaries back to France to share the gospel.

**Calvin did not just educate them** and send men back to France. These missionaries did not just become photographic memories on Calvin's refrigerator door. On the contrary; Calvin remained intimately involved in all that they were doing.

The Genevan archives hold hundreds of letters containing Calvin's pastoral and practical advice on establishing underground churches. He did not just send missionaries; he invested himself in long-term relationships with them.

Concrete information exists from the year 1555 onwards. The data indicate that by 1555, there were five underground Protestant churches in France. By 1559, the number of these Protestant churches jumped to more than one hundred. And scholars estimate that by 1562 there were more than 2,150 churches established in France with approximately three-million Protestant souls in attendance.

This can only be described as an explosion of missionary activity; detonated in large part by the Genevan Consistory and other Swiss Protestant cities. Far from being disinterested in missions, history shows that Calvin was enraptured by it.

To be a missionary in France was so dangerous that the Genevan Consistory decided not to keep any record of such missionary activity in order to protect their lives. And so the Genevan Consistory deliberately obscured the names and the numbers of missionaries sent out from Geneva.

Scholar Peter Wilcox has combed the Genevan archives and dusted off some of Calvin's five hundred-year old correspondence. Much to his surprise, Wilcox discovered a treasure trove of material indicating that the last ten years of Calvin's life in Geneva (1555–1564) were preoccupied with missions. Among the dusty tomes were letters written by the Genevan missionaries themselves revealing just how successful they had been. One French church in Bergerac boasted to Calvin:

“There is, by the grace of God, such a movement in our district, that the devil is already for the most part driven out, so that we

are able to provide ministers for ourselves. From day to day, we are growing, and God has caused His Word to bear such fruit that at sermons on Sundays, there are about four- to five-thousand people.”

Another letter from Montpelier rejoiced, “Our church, thanks to the Lord, has so grown and so continues to grow every day that we are obliged to preach three sermons on Sundays to a total of five- to six-thousand people.”

And it gets better. A pastor in Toulouse wrote to the Genevan Consistory: “Our church has grown to the astonishing number of about eight- to nine-thousand souls.”

Calvin didn’t just plant small fledgling churches; he planted mega-churches that in turn planted more churches. It is difficult to fathom the extraordinary success of these Genevan sponsored missionaries. Even in our modern era, such statistics are unheard of.

The French government became so concerned about all these churches being planted that they sent a letter of protest to the Genevan city council. The Genevan city council responded by saying, “What missionaries?”

**Genevan missionaries planted churches** in other European destinations. Records indicate missionaries also were sent to Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland and the free Imperial city-states in the Rhineland. The late Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, one of the few modern scholars aware of this extraordinary achievement, concluded that Calvin’s Geneva was a “school of missions... [and] a dynamic centre of missionary concern and activity.”

There is still more to the story of Genevan missions. It is one thing to send missionaries to Europe, but what about transcontinental missions? Once again, Calvin earns high marks. As a matter of historical fact, Calvin also sent missionaries across the Atlantic Ocean to South America. It is a little known missionary episode that reads like an adventure story.

Because of increasing persecution, the leading Protestant in France, Admiral Coligny, embraced a grand vision for establishing a French Protestant colony in the New World where Protestants would be free to worship. Coligny sent out an expedition that eventually landed in what is now Brazil. Along with his plans to establish a colony in Brazil, Coligny collaborated with Calvin to provide missionaries to the new settlement.

We actually know the names of the two missionaries that Geneva sent to Brazil—Pierre Richier and William Chartier. These two Genevan

trained missionaries were to serve as chaplains to the settlers and bring the gospel to Brazil's natives.

The French expedition landed in Rio de Janeiro on March 10, 1557, and suddenly things took a turn for the worse. Nicholas Durand de Villegagnon, the leader of the expedition, turned traitor to the Protestant cause. He decided to create his own South American fiefdom. When the French Protestant settlers disapproved, he actually killed a number of them. The Protestant colonists and the Genevan missionaries fled into the Brazilian jungle where they found refuge, believe it or not, with a tribe of cannibals.

Over time, the Protestant colonists and missionaries eventually made their way back to France where one of them (Jean de Lery) wrote a book describing his Brazilian adventures. He described how the colonists and missionaries made every effort to share the gospel with the cannibals. Although their efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful, they nevertheless exhibited an abiding missionary interest—even in the midst of a terrible trial.

**What motivated Calvin's extraordinary missions interests?** The answer, in part, can be found in Calvin's sermons. Calvin's sermons typically offer a concluding prayer. These prayers often repeated his most deeply held convictions. After preaching a sermon on 1 Timothy 2:3, Calvin offered this prayer:

“Seeing that God has given us such a treasure and so inestimable a thing as His Word, we must employ ourselves as much as we can, that it may be kept safe and sound and not perish. And let every man be sure to lock it up securely in his own heart. But it is not enough to have an eye to his own salvation, but the knowledge of God must shine generally throughout the whole world.”

Similar sentiments are found in many of his concluding pastoral prayers. For Calvin, it was axiomatic that the salvation of our souls necessarily carries with it an inevitable desire to share the gospel with others.

Calvin was missions-minded because he understood the transformational character of the gospel. He understood that when God saves a person, it makes a profound difference in that person's life and in the lives of others. If Calvin is taken as a model, Reformed theology ought to produce not only the best theologians, but also the best pastors and missionaries. These convictions reveal the true Calvin behind the image. 🌹

# Calvin the Calvinist

*Erroll Hulse*

Excerpt from *Who Saves? God or Me?* by Erroll Hulse, published by Evangelical Press in January 2009.

Even though John Calvin (1509-1564) died 54 years before the Synod of Dort his name has been associated with the five points. They are nearly always called *The Five Points of Calvinism* even though Calvin had nothing to do with the formulation of them.

On October 16, 1551 a dramatic confrontation occurred in Geneva between John Calvin and Jerome Bolsec over the doctrine of predestination.

Jerome Bolsec, a Carmelite monk and doctor of theology in Paris, was drawn to the Reformation and so forced to leave France. By early 1551 he had settled in the canton of Geneva working as a physician. He became critical of Calvin's doctrine of predestination. It was a Friday evening when one of the Genevan ministers at a regular meeting for a sermon and discussion preached on predestination. Bolsec, who seemed to think that Calvin himself was absent, criticised Calvin and his doctrine of predestination very sharply. In response Calvin rose and gave a brilliant defence of predestination. Calvin's teaching on this subject is clearly unpacked in his Systematic Theology popularly know as *The Institutes*.

As we would expect, Calvin's teaching anticipates the formularies of Dort including the doctrine of God's love for all mankind and the free, unfettered and uninhibited offers of the gospel to sinners.

In his commentary on Romans 5:18 Calvin writes: "Paul makes grace common to all men, not because it in fact extends to all, but because it is offered to all. Although Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men, yet not all receive him." Note Calvin uses the word offered. Also noteworthy is his concept of God's goodness which is consistent with his belief in common grace. The goodness of God is given to all mankind, not the elect only.

Calvin's concept of common grace has been the subject of intense study. The most comprehensive work ever written on the subject of common grace is in Dutch by Abraham Kuiper in three large volumes. An important work discussing the various positions held on common grace is by Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*.<sup>1</sup> Writers on this subject refer to Calvin's recognition that the good in mankind, including religious aspiration, decent behaviour, social brotherliness, artistic and scientific achievement, is bestowed by God. There are many such references in Calvin's *Institutes*.<sup>2</sup>

In Calvin's commentary on Matthew 23:37, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" he suggests that we have here a lament which expresses a "maternal kindness." He writes as follows: "In a manner of speaking, God bares his breast to us in the overtures of the gospel."... "Indeed, it is precisely the tender-heartedness of God's lament in the Person of his Son that renders human unbelief in response to the Gospel such a monstrous thing. For this reason—the sinner's stubborn refusal to respond appropriately to God's kind overtures—a dreadful vengeance awaits us as often as the teaching of his gospel is put before us, unless we quietly hide ourselves under his wings, in which he is ready to take us up and shelter us."<sup>3</sup>

In his lectures on Ezekiel, Calvin expressly states that God announces through the prophet, "his wish is that all should be saved" (Ezekiel 18:23,32). Likewise on 1 Peter 3:9 Calvin observes, "Though God has secretly determined to save the elect alone, he declares in the Gospel that he desires the salvation of all. The only solution open to us is to acknowledge that in his revealed will God stretches out his hand to all alike, even though secretly he has determined to save one and not another. Nonetheless, there is no ultimate disharmony between God's purpose of election and the universal call of the gospel, however difficult this harmony may be for us to comprehend."

Calvin does not expound the extent of the atonement. Efforts have been made to determine Calvin's view on that subject by referring to his commentaries. Dr. R. T. Kendall claimed that Calvin believed in an unlimited atonement, which is the view of Paul Van Buren, J. W. Anderson and Curt Daniel. A. A. Hodge, Robert Godfrey, Roger Nicole maintain that Calvin did believe in a limited atonement. S. J. Hayhow in an article in the *Banner of Truth* magazine (Issue 330) maintains that Calvin implicitly held to particular atonement. His citation of Calvin shows that Calvin certainly held to the sufficiency of the atonement for all. In another article

in the same magazine (Issue 398) Iain Murray refutes firmly Dr. Alan Clifford who seeks to build a major theological structure on his view that Calvin held to a universal atonement.

Robert A Peterson Sr. in his book *Calvin and the Atonement*<sup>4</sup> points to the fact that both sides can select evidence to support their position. Peterson observes that there are two strains in Calvin and these reflect the Bible's own antinomy between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is refreshing to see in Calvin's commentaries an insistence to allow the text to speak for itself even when this would seem to contradict limited atonement. Examples are John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2.

In contrast John Gill in his book *The Cause of God and Truth* works on these texts in such a way to deprive them of the plain meaning they are intended to convey. Sadly this reveals a scholastic and rationalistic way of thinking. Spurgeon in commenting on Gill's commentary describes Gill as "hacking and hewing terribly to bring the Word of God into a more systematic shape."<sup>5</sup> Arminians on the one side and Hyper-Calvinists on the other cannot live with antinomy. Both impose human reasoning on the text of Scripture. Both attempt to unscrew the inscrutable.

Robert A Peterson Sr. confesses, "I have resisted the temptation to read my view into Calvin. I hold to a position of limited atonement but continue to think that the evidence is too ambiguous to allow a definitive answer to the question of what Calvin taught on the matter" (p. 118). In this view Peterson is followed by Robert Letham.<sup>6</sup>☹

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 232 pages.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 276.

<sup>3</sup> With regard to the tender-heartedness of God, Don Carson speaks of God's yearning, inviting, seeking love and he refers to John 3:16 and Ezekiel 33. Don A Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Paternoster, 2002), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement* (Mentor, 1999), ISBN 1 85792 377 4.

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1954), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort*, 2 vols (Ph.D dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1979) 1:125-126.

# Calvin and the Atonement

## *The Necessity and Nature of the Atonement: Insights from Calvin*

Tom Ascol

Excerpt from *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, & Doxology*  
edited by Burk Parsons, published by Reformation Trust in 2008.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the hinge on which all biblical revelation turns. Together with the resurrection of Christ, it is the apex of redemptive history. Everything prior to it anticipated it and was calculated by God to set it up and bring it to pass in just the right way at the right time. Everything after the death of Jesus derives its meaning and significance from it.

Despite its centrality the cross remains a “folly” and “stumbling block” to many who hear of it but do not understand its necessity or nature. Yet, as the Apostle Paul also notes, for those who are called, Christ crucified is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). John Calvin deeply appreciated the centrality of the work of Christ. “Our salvation,” he stated, “consists in the doctrine of the cross.”<sup>1</sup> His insights help us appreciate why Jesus had to die and what He accomplished.

### The Necessity of Atonement

What is it that makes atonement for sin necessary? Calvin is careful to ground every aspect of salvation on the decree of God so that we recognize that all that comes to us is by divine mercy and grace. Thus he rejects the idea that the incarnation and atoning work of Christ were due to any kind of “absolute necessity.”<sup>2</sup> In a sermon on the death of Christ he declared, “God was well able to rescue us from the unfathomable depths of death in another fashion, but he willed to display the treasures of his infinite goodness when he spared not his only Son.”<sup>3</sup>

Given God’s gracious determination to save sinners, Calvin establishes the foundation of our need of atonement in his *Institutes of the Christian*

*Religion* long before he formally addresses the redeeming work of Christ. In fact, the reason atonement is necessary is found in the famous opening line of that work. “Nearly all the wisdom that we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>

Where God’s self-revelation is muted and the biblical testimony about human sin and depravity is rejected the atoning work of Jesus loses its *raison d’être*. H. Richard Niebuhr’s apt criticism of liberalism shows the close connection. “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross”<sup>5</sup>

Superficial knowledge of God and human nature prevents the cross from being regarded as the saving wisdom of God. Atonement is necessary because the creatures’ sin has provoked the wrath of a holy Creator. Those two biblical ideas—divine wrath and human depravity—are fundamental to understanding both the necessity and nature of the atonement that was accomplished by the sufferings and death of Jesus on the cross.

It would be hard to find an evangelical description of the atonement that does not highlight the love of God in providing it. That emphasis is certainly justified in light of New Testament teaching (John 3:16, Romans 5:8, 1 John 4:10). However, the glorious reality of God’s love in sending His Son to atone for sin must never be construed in a way that negates any of His other attributes, such as His jealousy and wrath, particularly when the work of Jesus on the cross is being considered.

If there is one aspect of God’s nature that most often is ignored when contemplating the atoning work of Christ, it is His wrath. Some have difficulty with the concept altogether, believing it to be in conflict with God’s love. Divine wrath is, however, clearly taught in both Old and New Testaments. Over twenty different Hebrew words are used nearly six hundred times in the Old Testament to describe God’s wrath.<sup>6</sup> Any inability to reconcile God’s love and wrath stems from unbiblical notions of morality. As Leon Morris notes, “It is a necessary part of moral character to abhor evil as well as to love good. God is actively and strongly opposed to all forms of evil; and the biblical writers express this opposition, in part at least, by speaking of the wrath of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Divine wrath should not be reduced to the mere natural retribution that occurs in a moral world as if it were some kind of impersonal effect that automatically follows certain causes.<sup>8</sup> Rather God’s wrath is personally and purposefully directed against human sin. Scripture describes God as “being angry with the wicked every day” (Psalm 7:11), as threatening to

pour out His wrath and “spend” his anger against people for their stated “abominations” (Ezekiel 7:8), as “burning with his anger” and “his lips ... full of fury” (Isaiah 30:27) and as having a day of wrath when his righteous judgment will be revealed (Romans 2:5). There is little doubt in the minds of biblical writers whose wrath it is that is being expressed.

There is nothing capricious about God’s wrath. It is simply “his response to sin.”<sup>9</sup> This means that there is a predictable consistency about what provokes God to anger. One need not wonder when or for what reasons divine wrath is aroused. When His law is violated His response to the violator is wrath. Granted, God’s wrath is not usually expressed immediately as it was in the cases of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1–3), Uzzah (1 Chronicles 13:3–11) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). Those dramatic displays are illustrative of God’s response to sin but, fortunately, are not a pattern of how His response is always or even usually executed. Precisely because God does not always respond immediately in this way to sin, many are skeptical about the whole idea of divine wrath. However, as Paul warns in Romans 2:1–11, those who practice unrighteousness are “storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.”

Calvin explains that even though God does not immediately punish every outbreak of sin, He “cannot bear injury or wrong” and “will yet be the defender of his own glory.” At the right time, God will carry out his judgment against sin.

God is not to be rashly judged of on account of his delay, when he does not immediately execute His judgments; for he waits for the seasonable opportunity. But, in the meantime there is no reason for us to think that he forgets his office when he suspends punishment, or for a season spares the ungodly. When, therefore, God does not hasten so very quickly, there is no ground for us to think that he is indifferent, because he delays his wrath, or retains it, as we have already said; for it is the same thing to retain wrath, as to be the Lord of wrath, and to possess it.<sup>10</sup>

God’s response toward all sinners is anger and opposition. His wrath is provoked and being stored up against all sin. The distinction that Roman Catholicism makes between venial and mortal sins is baseless. While Protestants rightly reject that kind of distinction theologically, too often it subtly informs much of the thinking about sin and judgment. God’s wrath in general, or hell in particular, is reserved for those guilty of “major sins,”

like Hitler or Hussein. Lesser sinners are tempted to hope that their case is significantly different. This is why even the title of Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," so often evokes such scorn. While it might be conceivable that some sinners would be in that horrible position, surely it is not true of all.

To this Calvin answers, "Every sin is a deadly sin!"<sup>11</sup> He is merely echoing the prophet Ezekiel who teaches, "the soul who sins shall die" (18:4, 20) and Paul who writes in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." Calvin exhorts Christians to acknowledge this fundamental, vital point of biblical teaching, "Let the children of God hold that all sin is mortal. For it is rebellion against the will of God, which of necessity provokes God's wrath, and it is a violation of the law, upon which God's judgment is pronounced without exception."<sup>12</sup>

This is true even for those whom God has elected before the foundation of the world to receive salvation. Though the objects of eternal, divine love, they are nevertheless liable to God's anger because of their sin. Paul reminds the Ephesians of this fact when he writes that Christians were "by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (2:3).

What this means is that, before their conversion, Christians are both deeply loved by God and opposed by Him simultaneously. Calvin states the matter quite starkly by quoting Augustine after invoking Romans 5:8.

Therefore, [God] loved us even when we practiced enmity toward him and committed wickedness. Thus in a marvelous and divine way he loved us even when he hated us. For he hated us for what we were that he had not made; yet because our wickedness had not entirely consumed his handiwork, he knew how, at the same time, to hate in each one of us what we had made, and to love what he had made.<sup>13</sup>

This apparent contradiction, or "duality," within God in His attitude toward sinners is seen elsewhere in Scripture, most graphically in the prophet Hosea. In the eleventh chapter God speaks passionately both about the wrath that Israel justly deserves from Him and the love He has for her that will not allow Him to "give [her] up" or "hand [her] over" (vv. 8–9). John Stott notes, "we must never think of this duality within God's being as irreconcilable." While we may "find it difficult to hold in our minds simultaneously the images of God as the Judge who must punish evil-doers and the Lover who must find a way to forgive them," nevertheless "he is both, at the same time."<sup>14</sup>

It is because of this that atonement had to be secured in the way that it was, by the death of Jesus Christ. For divine love to be fulfilled in the salvation of sinners someone must pay for their sins. The holy love of God can be neither compromised nor thwarted. It must be satisfied by the atoning death of One who represents those who are beloved. This is precisely what took place in the crucifixion of Jesus.

## The Nature of the Atonement

The New Testament speaks of the atoning work of Jesus in objective and definite terms. His death on the cross actually accomplished something definitive. By considering its accomplishment a clearer understanding of the nature of the atonement emerges. Three New Testament words are particularly important in explaining what actually took place on the cross—redemption, propitiation and reconciliation.

### Redemption

Calvin recognizes the whole course of Jesus' life as complicit in the work of redemption. "From the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us."<sup>15</sup> This is in keeping with Paul's consideration of the whole life of Christ—including his death—as "one man's obedience" by which "the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Nevertheless, the Scripture does speak more precisely in defining salvation by ascribing redemption as "peculiar and proper to Christ's death."<sup>16</sup>

In the first century the word "redemption" did not have the religious connotation that it does today. It was primarily used to describe deliverance that came through payment.<sup>17</sup> This applied to prisoners of war who were ransomed from captivity as well as to slaves who were granted freedom through the payment of a set fee. This same idea is found in the Old Testament in the laws governing the redemption of firstborn sons and male animals (Exodus 13:12–13, Numbers 3:40–49). Their freedom could be gained through the payment of a price.

In the New Testament the concept of redemption is found primarily in Paul's writings. He associates it closely with the death of Christ, "in whom," he writes, "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; cf. Galatians 3:13). His work on the cross ("his blood") is the means by which our redemption is accomplished.

This accords perfectly with Jesus' teaching that he came to "give his life as a ransom [λυτρον] for many" (Mark 10:45). The freedom that is gained by payment is redemption. The actual payment itself is the ransom and Jesus says the giving of His life (on the cross) is the payment that results in the deliverance of many.

So the death of Jesus was redemptive. It secured the deliverance of sinners by providing the payment necessary for their deliverance. As Calvin put it, Christ "made himself a ransom" and thereby has provided redemption.<sup>18</sup>

## Propitiation

There are only four undisputed texts in the New Testament where the Greek word-group associated with propitiation (ἰλάσκομαι) is used in connection with the atoning work of Jesus on the cross (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). The concept, however, is pervasive.<sup>19</sup> It is a personal idea (some one must be propitiated) and means more than the impersonal notion of expiation, which means to take away or remove something (as in sin and guilt). To propitiate someone is to "appease or pacify his anger."<sup>20</sup>

Propitiation, then, necessarily presupposes anger that needs to be appeased. When the death of Christ is described in propitiatory terms it is the holy wrath of God against sin that is in view. Jesus propitiates God by substituting Himself in the place of sinners and enduring divine wrath that is justly unleashed on them. Calvin explains how this took place on the cross.

He placed himself in our room, and thus became a sinner, and subject to the curse, not in himself indeed, but in us, yet in such a manner, that it became necessary for him to occupy our place. He could not cease to be the object of his Father's love, and yet he endured his wrath. For how could he reconcile the Father to us, if he had incurred his hatred and displeasure? ... Again, how would he have freed us from the wrath of God, if he had not transferred it from us to himself? Thus, "he was wounded for our transgressions," (Isaiah 53:5,) and had to deal with God as an angry judge. This is the foolishness of the cross, (1 Corinthians 1:18) and the admiration of angels, (1 Peter 1:12,) which not only exceeds, but swallows up, all the wisdom of the world.<sup>21</sup>

This understanding of the atonement is repulsive to many modern sensibilities. Steve Chalke has scandalously charged the propitiatory, substitutionary, sacrificial death of Jesus with “cosmic child abuse.”<sup>22</sup> Apart from draining biblical texts that speak of the cross as redemption and propitiation this accusation betrays a superficial appreciation of the sinfulness of human sin and the wrath of God against it. Sin has made us the objects of divine wrath. “Christ,” Calvin writes, “was the price of our ‘chastisement,’ that is, of the chastisement which was due to us. Thus the wrath of God, which had been justly kindled against us, was appeased.”<sup>23</sup>

## Reconciliation

Because the cross is a work of redemption and propitiation, it accomplishes reconciliation between God and sinners. Because of sin, the original friendship between God and man that was established at creation has been exchanged for enmity. Sinners are thus regarded by God as His enemies. For reconciliation to occur, the cause for the enmity must be removed—sin must be taken away.

Christ has accomplished exactly this in his death. Paul writes that it was “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son” (Romans 5:10). What Jesus did on the cross removed the cause of the breach in the relationship between God and sinners. His death has expiated our sins. Calvin’s comments on the announcement of John the Baptist upon seeing Jesus for the first time underscore this point.

The principal office of Christ is briefly but clearly stated; that he *takes away the sins of the world* by the sacrifice of his death, and reconciles men to God. There are other favors, indeed, which Christ bestows upon us, but this is the chief favor, and the rest depend on it; that, by appeasing the wrath of God, he makes us to be reckoned holy and righteous. For from this source flow all the streams of blessings, that, by not imputing our sins, he receives us into favor. Accordingly, John, in order to conduct us to Christ, commences with the gratuitous forgiveness of sins which we obtain through him.<sup>24</sup>

In the old covenant expiation of sins was portrayed by means of animal sacrifice. All of the ceremony surrounding the sacrificial offerings was designed to point to the work of Christ on the cross. Calvin elaborates,

The sacrifice was offered in such a manner as to expiate sin by enduring its punishment and curse. This was expressed by the priests by means of the laying on of hands, as if they threw on the sacrifice the sins of the whole nation (Exodus 29:15). And if a private individual offered a sacrifice, he also laid his hand upon it, as if he threw upon it his own sin. Our sins were thrown upon Christ in such a manner that he alone bore the curse.... [This describes] the benefit of Christ's death, that by his sacrifice sins were expiated, and God was reconciled towards men.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Without the right starting point it impossible to come to a right conclusion about what Jesus accomplished by His death on the cross. God's holy love that issues forth in wrath against all that is unrighteous—both sin and sinners—along with mankind's universal and all pervasive sinfulness assure us that there can be no salvation without atonement. God must be appeased, sin must be removed, and peace must be reestablished in the relationship between the two. Jesus has secured all of this through His sacrificial death. Those who, by faith, entrust themselves to Him receive all of these benefits of His work on the cross.

It is in the cross that we discover the depth of both God's love for us and His wrath against us. Because of sin, He is hostile to us. Because of His grace, he loves us. His wrath we deserve. His love comes to us freely. By delivering up His Son on the cross God satisfies them both. This led Calvin to call the cross of Christ "a magnificent theatre" for the glory of God.

[In it], the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world. In all the creatures, indeed, both high and low, the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross, in which there has been an astonishing change of things, the condemnation of all men has been manifested, sin has been blotted out, salvation has been restored to men; and, in short, the whole world has been renewed, and every thing restored to good order.<sup>26</sup> ☺

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 274–75.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics, 20–21 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 2.12.1

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1988), 221.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

<sup>5</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 193.

<sup>6</sup> *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Wrath of God.”

<sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, *The Atonement, its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 153, 156.

<sup>8</sup> In the last century C. H. Dodd was the most prominent spokesman against this view, arguing that the wrath of God should be regarded as impersonal. For extensive refutation of this view see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 145–213 and Roger Nicole, “C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation” in *Standing Forth* (Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 343–85.

<sup>9</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 464.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 420–21.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.59. In his commentary on Habakkuk 1:13 (Minor Prophets, vol. 4, 45), Calvin paraphrases the prophet’s complaint to God by saying, “It is not consistent with thy nature to pass by the vices of men, for every iniquity is hateful to thee.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 2.14.4.

<sup>14</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986), 131. Stott treats this subject very helpfully on pages 129–32.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Morris has an excellent study of the *λυτρον* word-group in both its biblical and extra-biblical usage in *Apostolic Preaching*, 11–64.

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 94. See also Robert Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1999), 91–99.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 144.

<sup>20</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 169. Stott continues with a helpful, brief summary of the debate over the meaning of the *ἰλάσκειν* word-group on pages 169–73.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 92.

<sup>22</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 182–183.

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 116.

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 63.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 4:124–25. Calvin further explains his point: “Hence it follows that nowhere but in Christ is found expiation and satisfaction for sin. In order to understand this better, we must first know that we are guilty before God, so that we may be accursed and detestable in his presence. Now, if we wish to return to a state of favor with him, sin must be taken away. This cannot be accomplished by sacrifices contrived according to the fancy of men. Consequently, we must come to the death of Christ; for in no other way can satisfaction be given to God. In short, Isaiah teaches that sins cannot be pardoned in any other way than by betaking ourselves to the death of Christ. If any person think that this language is harsh and disrespectful to Christ, let him descend into himself, and, after a close examination, let him ponder how dreadful is the judgment of God, which could not be pacified but by this price; and thus the inestimable grace which shines forth in making Christ accursed will easily remove every ground of offense (Ibid., 125).

<sup>26</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 73.

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# Calvin on Missions

*“A sacrifice well pleasing to God”:*

*John Calvin and the Missionary Endeavor of the Church<sup>1</sup>*

*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. First of all, it is vital to recognize that, as Scott Hendrix has wonderfully shown, the Reformation was the attempt to “make European culture more Christian than it had been. It was, if you will, an attempt to reroot faith, to rechristianize Europe.”<sup>2</sup> 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. And second, the Reformers viewed their task as a missionary one: they were planting true Christian churches.<sup>3</sup>

Now, in what follows, one reformer in particular, the Frenchman John Calvin (1509–1564), has been selected to show the error of the perspective that the Reformation was non-missionary.<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup> 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. 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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 endeavors and our labors shall by no means fail of that success, which is not yet apparent.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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?<sup>17</sup>

In other word, 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 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 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 honor of him who has ransomed us at so costly a price in order to bear rule in the midst of us.<sup>18</sup>

Then, we are to evangelize because we have been commanded to do so by Christ.<sup>19</sup>

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?"<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

### 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 re-

ligious refugees.<sup>22</sup> 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 2 million members, many of them converted through the witness of men trained in Geneva.<sup>23</sup> 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 encouraged a mission to Brazil in 1555, which turned out, though, to be a failure.<sup>24</sup>

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 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."<sup>25</sup>☺

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article first appeared in the online journal *Reformation 21*, 13 (September 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Scott Hendrix, "Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization", *Church History*, 69 (2000), 561.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 558–568.

<sup>4</sup> David B. Calhoun, "John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure," *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, 5, No.1 (Spring 1979), 17.

<sup>5</sup> The first three quotes are cited by Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 17.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Cited Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 2:12.

<sup>9</sup> *Commentary* on Isaiah 12:5.

<sup>10</sup> “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 18.

<sup>11</sup> Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 19, n.23.

<sup>12</sup> *Commentary* on Genesis 17:23.

<sup>13</sup> *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18–19 [*Ioannis Calvinii 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, G.m.b.H., 1964), 29:175]. Trans. author.

<sup>14</sup> Cited Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Letter 318* [in Jules Bonnet, ed., *Letters of John Calvin*, tr. Mr. Constable (1858 ed.; reprint, New York: Lenox Hill Pub. & Dist. Co., 1972), II, 406].

<sup>16</sup> Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18–19 (*Ioannis Calvinii Opera*, 29:175). Trans. author.

<sup>18</sup> *Letter 339* (Bonnet, ed., *Letters*, II, 453).

<sup>19</sup> Calhoun, “John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure,” 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Sermon 196*, on Deuteronomy 33:18–19 (*Ioannis Calvinii Opera*, 29:175). Trans. author.

<sup>21</sup> *Commentary on Isaiah 2:3*.

<sup>22</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford, UK/Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), 121.

<sup>23</sup> W. Stanford Reid, “Calvin’s Geneva: A Missionary Centre,” *The Reformed Theological Review*, 42, No.3 (September–December, 1983), 69.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> *Letters*, II, 227.

# John and Idelette Calvin

By Michael A.G. Haykin with Victoria J. Haykin

Excerpt from: *The Christian Lover: The Sweetness of Love and Marriage in the Letters of Believers* by Michael A.G. Haykin with Victoria J. Haykin (Reformed Trust Publishing, 2009).

If Martin Luther was the pioneer of the Reformation, his younger contemporary, John Calvin (1509–1563), should be regarded as the Reformation’s systematic theologian. For nearly all of his ministry, from 1536 till his death in 1564, Calvin was in exile in Francophone Geneva. These years in Geneva were interrupted, though, by a period spent in Strasbourg from 1538 to 1541, and it was during that period that Calvin was married.

At the urging of a number of friends, including his close colleague Guillaume Farel (1489–1565), Calvin had drawn up a list of the attributes he sought in a wife. He was not really concerned with physical beauty, he told Farel on one occasion. Instead, he was looking for a woman who was chaste, sober-minded, prudent, patient, and able “to take care of my health.”<sup>1</sup> Farel told him that he knew just the woman, but it didn’t work out. Then a woman from the upper class was proposed. But she couldn’t speak French, about which Calvin was not at all happy. Calvin was also afraid that her social status might be an inducement to pride. Calvin’s brother Antoine (d. 1573), though, was keen about the marriage. So Calvin agreed to consider marriage as long as the woman promised to learn French. This was at the beginning of 1540.<sup>2</sup> But by late March of that year, Calvin was saying that he would never think of marrying her “unless the Lord had entirely bereft me of my wits.”<sup>3</sup>

By August, however, he had met and married another woman, a widow by the name of Idelette de Bure (ca. 1499–1549) who had two children. Her first husband, Jean Stordeur (d.1540), had been an Anabaptist leader, who, through discussing theology with Calvin, had become convinced of the Reformed position.

Calvin did not say a lot about his wife in his letters during their eight and a half years of marriage (she died in March 1549, having suffered from ill health for a number of years), but two statements reveal how close they were.<sup>4</sup> For example, during the spring of 1541, before he returned to

Geneva, Calvin was with his wife in Strasbourg. A plague was raging in the city, and Calvin decided to stay in Strasbourg but send his wife away for her safety. He wrote to Farel that “day and night my wife has been constantly in my thoughts, in need of advice now that she is separated from her husband.”<sup>5</sup> A second statement appears in a letter written after the death of their one son, Jacques, who died soon after his premature birth in 1542. “The Lord,” Calvin wrote to another close friend, Pierre Viret (1511–1571), “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.”<sup>6</sup>

In the two letters that follow, Calvin gives details of Idelette’s death to Viret and Farel. His intense grief speaks to his deep love for her. And one sees Calvin’s tenderness toward his wife as he tells of his steps to relieve any anxieties she may have had about the future of her children after her death. Such kindness is a model for spouses.

John Calvin to Pierre Viret <sup>7</sup>

April 7, 1549

Although the death of my wife has been exceedingly painful to me, yet I subdue my grief as well as I can. Friends, also, are earnest in their duty to me. It might be wished, indeed, that they could profit me and themselves more; yet one can scarcely say how much I am supported by their attentions. But you know well enough how tender, or rather soft, my mind is. Had not a powerful self-control, therefore, been vouchsafed 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 so been ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my indignance, but even of 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 entire course of her illness; she was more anxious about her children than about herself. As I feared these private cares might annoy her to no purpose, I took occasion, on the third day before her death, to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty to her children. Taking up the matter immediately, she said, “I have already committed them to God.” When I said that was not to prevent me from caring for them, she replied, “I know you will not neglect what you know has been committed to God.”

John Calvin to Guillaume Farel<sup>8</sup>

Geneva, April 11, 1549

Intelligence of my wife's death has perhaps reached you before now. I do what I can to keep myself from being overwhelmed with grief. My friends also leave nothing undone that may administer relief to my mental suffering. When your brother left, her life was all but despaired of. When the brethren were assembled on Tuesday, they thought it best that we should join together in prayer. This was done. When Abel, in the name of the rest, exhorted her to faith and patience, she briefly (for she was greatly worn) stated her frame of mind. I afterwards added an exhortation, which seemed to me appropriate to the occasion. And then, as she made no allusion to her children, I fearing that, restrained by modesty, she might be feeling an anxiety concerning them, which would cause her greater suffering than the disease itself, declared in the presence of the brethren, that I should henceforth care for them as if they were my own. She replied, "I have already committed them to the Lord." When I replied, that that was not to hinder me from doing my duty, she immediately answered, "If the Lord shall care for them, I know they will be commended to you." Her magnanimity was so great, that she seemed to have already left the world.

About the sixth hour of the day, on which she yielded up her soul to the Lord, our brother Bourgo<sup>9</sup> addressed some pious words to her, and while he was doing so, she spoke aloud, so that all saw her heart was raised far above the world. For these were her words: "O glorious resurrection! O God of Abraham, and all our fathers, in thee have the faithful trusted during so many past ages, and none of them have trusted in vain. I also will hope." These short sentences were rather ejaculated than distinctly spoken. This did not come from the suggestion of others, but from her own reflections, so that she made it obvious in few words what were her own meditations.

I had to go out at six o'clock. Having been removed to another apartment after seven, she immediately began to decline.

When she felt her voice suddenly failing her, she said: "Let us pray: let us pray. All pray for me." I had not returned. She was unable to speak, and her mind seemed to be troubled. I, having spoken a few words about the love of Christ, the hope of eternal life, concerning our married life, and her departure, engaged in prayer. In full possession of her mind, she both heard the prayer, and attended to it. Before eight she expired, so calmly, that those present could scarcely distinguish between her life and death. I at present control my sorrow so that my duties may not be interfered with....

Adieu, brother, and very excellent friend. May the Lord Jesus strengthen you by his Spirit; and may he support me also under this heavy affliction, which would certainly overcome me had not he, who raises up the prostrate, strengthens the weak, and refreshes the weary, stretched forth his hand from heaven to me. Salute all the brethren and your whole family.

—Yours,

John Calvin

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975), 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–72.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 70–71.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in *ibid.* 71.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> From *Letters of John Calvin*, compiled by Jules Bonnet (1858 ed.; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), 2:217–219.

<sup>8</sup> From *Ibid.*, 216–217.

<sup>9</sup> François Bourguoin was one of the elders in the Geneva church.

## Book Review

Parsons, Burk, ed. *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, & Doxology* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2008), 257pp. \$19.00.

*Reviewed by Tim Brister*

In the providence of God, we are living in a time when the resurgence of Calvinism is celebrating the 500th year of John Calvin's birth. Unlike generations past, Calvinism is cool, even to the point that *The New York Times* is writing reports on the leaders of this new generation of Calvinists. Molly Worthen, author of the *New York Times*' article, made a striking conclusion about the Calvinism of this generation:

“[The] New Calvinism underscores a curious fact: the doctrine of total human depravity has always had a funny way of emboldening, rather than humbling, its adherents” [“What Would Jesus Smack Down?” by Molly Worthen *The New York Times* (January 6, 2009)].

Worthington's “fact” cannot be sustained by the historical record and it is certainly not true of Calvin himself because the sixteenth-century reformer knew nothing of any doctrine that promotes pride rather than humility. The book, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, & Doxology* demonstrates this by peeling back the layers of modern-day half-truths and caricatures to show the true nature of the man and his message. The editor, Burk Parsons, explains that “the purpose of this volume [is] that the people of God might more fully trust, invoke, praise, and love the Lord” (xix).

More than merely focusing on Calvin, this book, as Calvin would undoubtedly desire, aims to give a deeper and truer knowledge of Calvin's God. If it is agreeable that “a true Calvinist is one who strives to think as Calvin thought and live as Calvin lived—insofar as Calvin thought and lived as our Lord Jesus Christ” (6), then it is incumbent upon all Calvinists, especially those brought up in this recent resurgence, to read this book. Divided into two sections, the excellent list of nineteen contributors provides both breadth and depth into both Calvin's life and thought in a way that both the layman and scholar can richly benefit. But more importantly, the tenor of the chapters exhibit the humility of Calvin and cast his writings under the majesty of the God whose fear was always in his heart.

Calvin's life-long prayer was, “I offer my heart to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely” (32), and this book provides a panoramic picture—whether

as disciple of Christ, churchman, preacher, Reformer, theologian, or statesman—of how that prayer produced a man who was “mastered by God” (7). Of all the books that are available today in honor of Calvin, perhaps none gives a better glimpse into the man who gazed at God through the lens of His Word. Given the popular misperception that Calvinists are not committed to evangelism, missions, or church planting, however, it would have been helpful had more emphasis been given to Calvin’s impact in leading Geneva to become the greatest missionary sending city during the Reformation.

To glean from the teachings of Calvin, is to have as a tutor a man intimately acquainted with the greatest knowledge in the world—the knowledge of God Himself.

Should we follow the example of Calvin, we would have as a friend a man whose devotion was a touchstone for humility. A closer look into the life of Calvin would garner a deeper love for God and His Word, which to no one’s surprise, reveals the enduring impact of the contribution he made, and continues to make, 500 years after his birth. ☺

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### More Recent and Upcoming Titles on Calvin and Calvinism

*A Reader's Guide to Calvin's Institutes* by Anthony Lane (Baker Academic, June 2009).

*John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* by W. Robert Godfrey (Crossway, April 2009).

*John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* by Hermon J. Selderhuis (IVP Academic, March 2009).

*The Soul of Life: The Piety of John Calvin* by Joel Beeke (Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

*The Piety of John Calvin: A Collection of His Spiritual Prose, Poems and Hymns* by Ford Lewis Battles (P&R Publishing, May 2009).

*John Calvin and His Passion for the Glory of God* by John Piper (Crossway, 2008).

*A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis* by David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (P&R Publishing, 2008).

*The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World* by David W. Hall (P&R Publishing, 2008)

*The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* by Wulfert de Greef (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, expanded edition).

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