

John Calvin and Missions

By Wes Bredenhof

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, scholars are devoting attention to various aspects of his thought and influence. Strangely, one area that does not receive much attention today (and never really has, for that matter) is the relationship of John Calvin to the missionary task of the church. According to one popular missions textbook, John Calvin "said little about foreign mission."¹ John Calvin never even warranted a mention in Stephen Neill's *A History of Christian Missions*. When Calvin is mentioned in connection with mission, typically he is lumped in with the rest of the Reformation as being indifferent to the subject. Some interpreters account for that by alleging that the Reformers were too busy with intra- and extra-mural polemics to give any attention to their responsibility towards the lost.²

But is this all fair to the Genevan Reformer? Half a millennium after his birth, it is time to reassert the need for a more careful look at Calvin and missions. Such calls have been issued in the past, but have by and large been ignored in the study of missions.³ Old myths die hard. Nevertheless, if more such calls continue to be issued, perhaps Calvin will finally begin to receive the recognition he deserves. So, in this article, I want to briefly survey some of Calvin's thinking on this issue and also look at the manner in which he brought his mission-mindedness to bear on the lost at home and abroad.

Calvin on the Great Commission

It has sometimes been claimed by missions scholars that the so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 was not regarded by the Reformers as having any contemporary application. According to these scholars, the Reformers believed that the Great Commission's validity expired with the death of the apostles – in other words, it was only a commission for the apostles, not a timeless mandate for the church.⁴ This thesis is easy to disprove and the evidence lays close at hand in the writings of John Calvin.

When considering how the Reformers expounded Matthew 28:18-20, we need to first of all remember the manner in which this text had been abused by the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholics used this passage to support the idea of apostolic succession. That is what is in the background of Calvin's comments on Matthew 28:19,

Let us learn from this passage, that the apostleship is not an empty title, but a laborious office; and that consequently, nothing is more absurd or tolerable than that this honour should be claimed by hypocrites, who live like kings at their ease, and disdainfully throw away from themselves the office of teaching. The Pope of Rome and his band proudly boast of their succession, as if they held this rank in common with Peter and his companions; and yet they pay no more regard to doctrine than was paid by the Luperci [pagan worshippers], or the priests of Bacchus and Venus. And with what face, pray, do they claim to be the successors of those who, they are told, were appointed to be preachers of the gospel? But though they are not ashamed to display their impudence,

still with every reader of sound judgment this single word is sufficient to lay prostrate their silly hierarchy – that no man can be a successor of the apostles who does not devote his services to Christ in the preaching of the gospel.⁵

Calvin does not here take the position that the Great Commission is not valid for today. Rather, his argument is that the Roman Catholic Church cannot claim apostolic succession because it does not preach the gospel. Calvin was applying the text to his contemporary situation in one particular way, however that one way does not exclude further applications.

In point of fact, it is difficult to maintain that Calvin saw the passage as referring exclusively to the apostles. In the paragraph following the above quotation, Calvin can be found saying:

...the prophets under the law had limits assigned to them, but now, the wall of partition having been broken down (Eph. 2:14), the Lord commands the ministers of the gospel to go to a distance, in order to spread the doctrine of salvation in every part of the world.⁶

This is strong evidence for the position that, although Calvin saw the passage as applying in the first place to the apostles, he also drew a contemporary application which amounts to a timeless missionary mandate for the church. It is certain that Calvin never intimates or even insinuates the contrary.

A continuing missionary task for the post-apostolic church is also mentioned elsewhere in Calvin's writings. One of the most striking is his comment on Isaiah 12:4,5:

This exhortation, by which the Jews testified their gratitude, might be regarded as a forerunner of the preaching of the gospel, which afterwards followed in the proper order. As the Jews proclaimed among the Medes and Persians, and other neighbouring nations, the favour which had been shown to them, so, when Christ was manifested, they ought to have been heralds to sound aloud the name of God through every country in the world. Hence it is evident what is the desire which ought to be cherished among all the godly. It is, that the goodness of God may be made known to all, that all may join in the same worship of God. We ought especially to be inflamed with this desire, after having been delivered from some alarming danger, and most of all after having been delivered from the tyranny of the devil and everlasting death.⁷

This mission-mindedness is also evident in countless prayers from the hand of the Genevan Reformer. As just one example, consider this prayer written for use during Sunday worship services:

Moreover, we offer up prayers unto thee, O most gracious God and most merciful Father, for all men in general, that as thou art pleased to be acknowledged the Saviour of the whole human race by the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ thy Son, so those who are still strangers to the knowledge of him, and immersed in darkness, and held captive by ignorance and error, may, by thy Holy Spirit shining upon them, and by

thy gospel sounding in their ears, be brought back to the right way of salvation which consists in knowing thee the true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.⁸

One cannot truthfully say that Calvin had no sense of the church's continuing obligation to propagate the gospel among the lost. He understood very clearly that the Christian church has a timeless commission from the Lord to bring the glad tidings to the ends of the earth.

The Objects of Mission

We can draw Calvin's understanding of mission into sharper focus by asking: who are the objects of mission? Or, to phrase the question differently: where are the mission fields? To those questions, John Calvin would give a simple answer: "All unbelievers everywhere." For Calvin, missions was not necessarily a matter of taking a journey across the ocean. In fact, some of the largest and neediest mission fields of the sixteenth century were right in Europe.

This becomes evident already in the Prefatory Address to Francis I in the *Institutes*. According to Calvin, many of the French were hungering and thirsting for Christ, but very few had any knowledge of him.⁹ Under the Roman Church, "the light of divine truth had been extinguished, the Word of God buried..."¹⁰ The papists may take the name of Christ upon their lips, but in reality they do not hold fast to him.¹¹ Along with Martin Luther and other Reformers, Calvin adopted the view that the pope is Antichrist.¹² He not only denied that the Roman Church is the true church, but asserted that it is in a certain way no church at all. In fact, he went so far as to say that there is no difference between those in the Church of Rome and Muslims.¹³

In Calvin's mind, Europe under the sway of Romanism was essentially pagan, or at least sub-Christian. This was illustrated when Calvin was asked by one of his opponents whether a Reformed believer ought to refrain from marrying a Roman Catholic as one would refrain from marrying a Muslim. Calvin replied that the adherents of the Roman Church were outside of Christ and that consequently there could be no marriage in the Lord. Marriage between Reformed Christians and Romanists was unacceptable. Marrying a Roman Catholic was the same thing as marrying an unbeliever.¹⁴

From Calvin's standpoint, the lost were certainly in far-off lands. But they were also close to home, wherever Romanism was still adhered to. This observation is what led Fred Klooster to rightly assert that "the Reformation deserves to be called one of the greatest home missionary projects of all history."¹⁵ Calvin's broad perspective is still needed today in our era, where many take Christ's name upon their lips, but in reality few hold fast to him as he is revealed in Scripture.

Missionary Methods

The Reformer also gave attention to the practical side of missions. How are churches to spread the gospel? Calvin gave no shortage of good instruction on this point. His commentaries are pregnant with attention to the methods by which the mission of the church is to be executed.¹⁶

He indicates that the establishment of the kingdom of Christ is to take place through a deft use of the Sword of the Spirit (Commentary on Isaiah 53:2). Following the teachings of the Lord in Mark 9:38, the church is to pray that God would send labourers into his harvest and that he would “recruit their strength and efficaciously direct them, so that they may not labour in vain.” (Isaiah 49:17). The church is to use a gentle manner and persuasive methods to draw the curious in so that they freely come of their own accord (Micah 4:3 and Philemon 10). Calvin insists that Christians are never to use physical force or military might to impose faith on the unbelieving (Micah 4:3).

Furthermore, believers are to lead by example and let our lives match our words (Isaiah 2:3). According to Calvin, having been so richly blessed, believers ought to be eager to share their riches with others (2 Cor. 1:4). This obligation also includes earnest and godly prayer for the lost (1 Tim. 2:4).

Many more such comments can be gleaned from Calvin’s huge body of writings. But from this brief survey, it is clear that he was outward looking and that he encouraged his students and parishioners to be the same. John Calvin sought to do God’s will promptly and sincerely, and that included God’s will for the calling in of those estranged from the gospel promises.

Putting It All into Practice

The Reformed church in Geneva not only prayed that God would send labourers into the harvest – it also established an institution that would train men for the ministry. John Calvin’s Academy had a reputation as being a missionary training center. The missionaries in training were primarily being equipped for ministry in Romanist Europe. In 1544, a delegation was sent from the fledgling Reformed church in Tournai (then located in the Netherlands, today in Belgium) to Geneva, requesting that they send a Reformed missionary because of the great paganism in the land.¹⁷ During Calvin’s lifetime, at his direction, and having received his instruction, literally hundreds of men were sent out from Geneva to preach the Biblical gospel across Europe to the lost and confused.

Of course, no discussion of the relationship between Calvin and mission would be complete without a brief account of the Genevan mission to Brazil.¹⁸ In 1556, the Reformed church at Geneva sent out two missionaries to accompany a group of French Huguenots hoping to start a colony in Brazil. They arrived in March of 1557 and began work among the Tupinambas, an indigenous Brazilian people. The work was difficult and frustrating and ultimately ended up in disaster when the leader of the colony fell back into Romanism. Three of the Huguenots ended up being martyred for their faith, not by the Tupinambas, but by their fellow Frenchmen. Regardless of the tragic outcome, the effort is a testimony to the fact that John Calvin not only thought about and wrote about missions, he also put his words into actions and then not only at home (in Europe) but also overseas.

Conclusion

The impression is sometimes out there that the Protestant missionary movement did not really begin until the days of William Carey. While Carey certainly did represent a sea change in much of the broader Protestant world, Reformed believers can look back and see a rich missionary tradition going back to the first years of the Reformation. With John Calvin, Martin Bucer, and many other Reformers, there was a deep concern for the lost and confused both at home and abroad. Social and political considerations did not always allow that concern to be fully expressed in action – yet it was certainly there. As we celebrate Calvin’s birthday, we can also remember with thankfulness the fact that he called our attention to what the Scriptures say about the missionary calling of the church and also showed us how to put that calling into practice.

¹ *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 120-121.

² *Contemporary Missiology*, Johannes Verkuyl (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 19.

³ Cf. “Calvijn en de Zending,” J. VanderLinden, *De Reformatie* 17:46 (August 13, 1937), 376-377; “The Missionary Dynamic in the Theology of John Calvin,” Charles Chaney, *The Reformed Review* 17.3 (March, 1964), 24-38; “The Reformers and Missions,” S.H. Rooy, in *Signposts of God’s Liberating Kingdom: Perspectives for the 21st Century* (Vol.2) (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys, 1998), 187-224; “Calvin’s Evangelism,” Joel Beeke, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15 (2004), 67-86; “John Calvin in Mission Literature,” James DeJong, *Pro Rege* 4.1 (September 1975), 6-17.

⁴ For one example, see *Pentecost and Missions*, Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 20.

⁵ *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, John Calvin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 383-384.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁷ *Commentary on Isaiah*, John Calvin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 402-403.

⁸ *Tracts and Treatises Vol. 2: The Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, John Calvin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 102.

⁹ *Institutes* (Battles edition), Dedicatory Epistle, 9.

¹⁰ *John Calvin: Selections from his Writings*, ed. by John Dillenberger (Scholars Press, 1975), 102.

¹¹ *Institutes* 2.15.1

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.3.11-12

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.3.10

¹⁴ *Recultivating the Vineyard: the Reformation Agendas of Christianization*, Scott H. Hendrix (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 92.

¹⁵ “Missions – the Heidelberg Catechism and Calvin,” Fred H. Klooster, *Calvin Theological Journal* 7.2 (November 1972), 187.

¹⁶ What follows here is based on Rooy, *op.cit.*, 212-213.

¹⁷ *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands, 1544-1569*, Phyllis Mack Crew (New York: Cambridge UP, 1978), 53.

¹⁸ For fuller accounts, see Beeke, *op.cit.*, 79-82 and *Fulfil Your Ministry*, K. Deddens (Winnipeg: Premier, 1990), 158-160