

## CALVIN AND MISSIONS

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The year 2009 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the great Reformer John Calvin. This is the same man whose ideas of representative government, establishing the rights and liberties of citizens, and the Christian work ethic led to the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions, developing the most productive and prosperous societies in history. Through his writings and teachings, John Calvin dominated European and American history for centuries. Some of the greatest philosophers, writers, Reformers, and Christian leaders in history have described themselves as Calvinists. Some of John Calvin's influential disciples include John Knox, Oliver Cromwell, John Owen, John Milton, Richard Baxter, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, George Whitefield, William Carey, William Wilberforce, Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Spurgeon, David Livingstone, the Covenanters in Scotland, the Huguenots of France, and the Pilgrim founders of America.

On the other hand, over the centuries there has been no lack of criticism of John Calvin and the theological system called Calvinism. There is also criticism in the area of missions and the fulfillment of the Great Commission, as we understand it today. It would seem that some find this as a shortcoming of not only of John Calvin, but also of the entire Reformation period:

“Neither the Reformation in the sixteenth, nor Puritanism in the seventeenth century, was possessed of any foreign missionary zeal ... Luther and Zwingli, Calvin and Melancthon, Knox and Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, were too absorbed by the problems at their door, to see far afield ... A study of the lives of Milton and Bunyan, of Baxter and Fox, of Hampden and Marvell will reveal no urge to foreign missionary effort.”<sup>2</sup>

“The Lord's command to go and make disciples of all nations was for a long time understood by theologians to have been given only to the apostles and fulfilled by them. It was thought that the nations which had neglected or rejected the opportunity then given could be left to their well-deserved fate. A few among the Protestants did not so understand the Lord's command.”<sup>3</sup>

It is true that the missionary spirit among many groups during the Reformation period was feeble at best. The obstacles to a legitimate world evangelization were formidable.<sup>4</sup> Yet one notable exception was the missionary enterprise of Huguenot Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, in the year 1555. Sailing with two ships to Brazil and landing on an island off of today's Rio de Janeiro, he erected a settlement with the intent to establish a haven for the religiously persecuted in France and Spain, and to “constitute a Church in that country reformed according to the word

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Rattray Hay, *The New Testament Order for Church and Missionary*, 257.

<sup>3</sup> John Aberly, *An Outline of Missions*, 37.

<sup>4</sup> See the summary of this period in Morris McDonald, *A Brief Survey of Missions*, 32.

of God.”<sup>5</sup> Within a short time Villegagnon appealed to Calvin for more French settlers. Calvin appointed to this newly formed expedition two ministers, Richer and Chartier, along with twelve French exiles and others. By November 1556 three ships, including the Genevans, had sailed for Brazil. Landing in early 1557, Villegagnon had by that time established an order of worship, and had made serious plans to advance the gospel to the mainland inhabitants. Yet in the months following Villegagnon became disenchanted with Calvinism and turned against the Genevans. Tragically, the colony basically was finished long before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1560.

An important footnote to this mission is that, although John Calvin was indeed interested in this overseas missionary enterprise, as witnessed by his correspondence and the appointment of ministers, there were a number of sixteenth century realities that ultimately limited its overall success. Blame for the tragic failure of the Brazil colony could not be placed at his feet. Dr. Joel Beeke gives three legitimate reasons to view Calvin’s missionary interests in a much more favorable light:

1. Time constraints: the need to build “truth” in the infant Reformation church, and thus build a foundation upon which the mission church can be built.
2. Work at home: the establishment of the church at home first, in fulfillment of the Great Commission.
3. Government restrictions: most European governments being controlled by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

If direct intervention in “overseas foreign missions” was not deemed plausible or successful, the amazing work Calvin did in ministering to the refugees who were fleeing persecution from the Catholic Church might be seen as a brilliant missionary move.

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.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Washington Baird, *History of the Huguenot Emigration to America*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Joel R. Beeke, [www.hnrc.org/files/CalvinTeacherOfEvangelism.pdf](http://www.hnrc.org/files/CalvinTeacherOfEvangelism.pdf), 77-78.

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.<sup>7</sup>

So even as Geneva had become a center for refugees and, in truth, a missionary hub, Calvinism and the gospel spread throughout Europe. In France, for example, the Reformed church grew from 100 in 1555 to 2150 by 1562. "From 1555 to 1562 we know for sure that 88 preachers were sent from Geneva into France. Of these, nine laid down their lives as martyrs. There may have been more than 88."<sup>8</sup>

From France to England, Scotland, Poland, Hungary, and the Netherlands, evangelism reached the hearts of the masses, and the Reformed church grew as a direct result of the ministry of John Calvin and other Reformed leaders. John Calvin never presented a systematic theology of missions in his writings. However, it has been shown not only that a coherent theology of missions can be reconstructed from his writings, but that Calvin considered Geneva to be a "missionary center" for the evangelization of France, the rest of Europe, and even the New World. Perhaps the reason why no systematic theology of missions can be found in his writings is because missions was central to his ministry in Geneva. Missions was not a "section" of his systematic theology, it was central to what he was trying to accomplish in his ministry.<sup>9</sup>

In support of the above, possibly the strongest evidence of Calvin's heart for missions, which is really evangelism, can be found in his own words. Sermons, commentaries, his *Institutes*, and personal correspondence provide an unhindered glimpse to his Scriptural position. Take, for example, his commentary on Heb 10:25:

Having said, "Not forsaking the assembling together," he adds, But exhorting one another; by which he intimates that all the godly ought by all means possible to exert themselves in the work of gathering together the Church on every side; for we are called by the Lord on this condition, that every one should afterwards strive to lead others to the truth, to restore the wandering to the right way, to extend a helping hand to the fallen, to win over those who are without. But if we ought to bestow so much labor on those who

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<sup>7</sup> Frank A. James III, [http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/frank\\_james\\_2001\\_calvin\\_the\\_evangelist.pdf](http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/frank_james_2001_calvin_the_evangelist.pdf), 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Errol Hulse, <http://www.reformed-theology.org/html/issue04/calvin.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> See Scott J. Simmons, *John Calvin and Missions: A Historical Study*.

are yet aliens to the flock of Christ, how much more diligence is required in exhorting the brethren whom God has already joined to us?<sup>10</sup>

Did Calvin here not indicate that the godly are to use all means to win over those who are aliens to the flock? No geographical boundaries are presented, but simply to be in obedience to the Lord's commands—this was Calvin's directive.

In his sermon on 2 Tim 1:8-9, he writes:

If the gospel be not preached, Jesus Christ is, as it were, buried. Therefore, let us stand as witnesses, and do Him this honor, when we see all the world so far out of the way; and remain steadfast in this wholesome doctrine... Let us here observe that St. Paul condemns our unthankfulness, if we be so unfaithful to God, as not to bear witness of His gospel; seeing He hath called us to it."

Is he not saying that the lack of evangelism was as if Christ was still in the tomb and an indication of our unthankfulness?<sup>11</sup>

A third example comes from his sermon on 1 Tim 2:3-5. Calvin writes:

Thus we may see what St. Paul's meaning is when he saith, God will have His grace made known to all the world, and His gospel preached to all creatures. Therefore, we must endeavor, as much as possible, to persuade those who are strangers to the faith, and seem to be utterly deprived of the goodness of God, to accept of salvation. Jesus Christ is not only a Savior of few, but He offereth Himself to all. As often as the gospel is preached to us, we ought to consider that God calleth us to Him: and if we attend to this call, it shall not be in vain, neither shall it be lost labor. Therefore, we may be so much the more assured that God taketh and holdeth us for His children, if we endeavor to bring those to Him who are afar off. Let us comfort ourselves, and take courage in this our calling: although there be at this day a great forlornness, though we seem to be miserable creatures, utterly cast away and condemned, yet we must labor as much as possible to draw those to salvation who seem to be afar off. And above all things, let us pray to God for them, waiting patiently till it please Him to show His good will toward them, as He hath shown it to us.<sup>12</sup>

Here the preacher recognized that we must labor, as much as possible, to bring the lost to salvation.

One final sample is in a sermon on Acts 1:7, where we read,

Now we know that God prizes nothing above his honour, which lies mainly in men's knowing him and poor souls' being brought to salvation. So let us not be surprised if our Lord wants his gospel to be proclaimed with such diligence that nothing can hinder its

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/ipb-e/epl-01/calhb-13.txt>.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.the-highway.com/Call\\_to\\_Witness.html](http://www.the-highway.com/Call_to_Witness.html).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.the-highway.com/Salvation\\_of\\_All.html](http://www.the-highway.com/Salvation_of_All.html).

course. For the only way men can come to salvation is through instruction in what the Bible teaches. Now since this is God's will, let us follow it.<sup>13</sup>

The necessity of the strong and confident proclamation of the gospel is clear in Calvin's plea.

With these very few examples we have a reliable indication as to the evangelistic-missionary heart of John Calvin. Combined with the above mentioned missionary endeavors, we may be confident that the work of missions during the Reformation, albeit in an infant stage, was genuine.

The final stage which legitimizes Calvin's involvement in missions comes with the history that followed his ministry. A study of missions history will reveal many familiar names, all Calvinists. Beginning with pioneer Baptist missionary William Carey (1761-1834), father of the modern missions movement, we can continue to John Patton (New Hebrides), Henry Martyn (India and Persia), Jonathan Goforth (China), and Adoniram Judson (Burma). Congregationalist David Brainard (1718-1747), missionary to the American Indians, found funding from the Presbyterians in Scotland. We need also to mention Calvinists such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and countless others. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it could be said that one-quarter of all Protestant missionaries in the world were Presbyterian. Such was, and continues to be, the influence of John Calvin on that great century of foreign missions.

One final quote from B. B. Warfield's article on *Calvinism*:

Calvinism has been proved an eminent incentive to all missionary enterprises, domestic and foreign. It is of course acknowledged that several Christian bodies not characterized by what are generally regarded as the peculiarities of Calvinism have been in the highest degree distinguished by missionary zeal and efficiency.... The charter of the Society of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was granted by the Calvinistic Prince, William III. It is to the Calvinistic Baptists that the impulse to modern Protestant missions is to be traced, and the Calvinistic churches are today behind none in their zeal for a success in missionary work.<sup>14</sup>

With those things in mind, we can confidently say that John Calvin's contribution to the work of missions has been unfolding before the world for nearly five hundred years. His doctrines of sin and grace gave clarity and meaning in an age where such was needed. It was and is the Holy Spirit who applies the truths of the Scriptures in the hearts of the elect to bring them to salvation, and then to service. The ministries of evangelism and missions are simply the natural progression of that work. We thank our Lord for the life and ministry of John Calvin, and for the countless numbers who follow him, as he has followed the Savior.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.corkfpc.com/soulwinnercalvinsaid.html>; *Calvin's Sermons on Acts 1-7*, BOT, 325.

<sup>14</sup> B. B. Warfield, "Calvinism," *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. by John E. Meeter (reprinted; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), 2:447.