



# PRESBYTERION

Covenant Seminary Review

## John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure?

*David B. Calhoun*

Vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 16–33

# **JOHN CALVIN: MISSIONARY HERO OR MISSIONARY FAILURE?**

by

*David B. Calhoun*

Estimates of John Calvin's attitude toward missions have ranged from hearty to moderate support to almost silent indifference to active opposition. The failure to understand accurately Calvin's view of missions has arisen from preconceived ideas about Calvin and his theology and from a too narrow focus on the subject. The whole issue has been dismissed at times by the facile assertion that Calvin's doctrine of divine election makes nonsense of all missionary and evangelistic activity. At other times it has been misunderstood or distorted because of the lack of a full definition of missions and the failure to study comprehensively both Calvin's missionary teaching and activity.

We must avoid a definition of missions which is too narrow and one which is too modern if we are to judge Calvin correctly. To define missions too narrowly reduces Calvin's missionary importance but then it also limits the Biblical understanding of the mission of the church which actually is to "Jerusalem" and "all Judea and Samaria" as well as to "the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Certainly the Bible sets no outer boundaries to the work of missions but neither does it relegate nearby witness to an inferior category. For Calvin, and the Reformers generally, there was no clear distinction between the Reformation and the church's missionary task. Calvin defines what we call missions as the work of God in extending His kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. It is necessary that we evaluate him in the light of this definition rather than a more restricted one. The question is not so much why Calvin did not promote more strongly "foreign" missions (although we will have to ask that question) but is his theology missiological—that is, does it essentially contain an inner dynamic that compels Christians to seek to enlist others under the rule of Christ and to spread His kingdom in all the world?

## *Calvin's Missiological Teaching*

Calvin, along with the other Reformers, did a great service to missions generally by his earnest proclamation of the gospel and his re-ordering of the church according to Biblical requirements. The missionary message

and the structure of missions are two primary concerns which can be informed by his insights. More specifically, however, Calvin's teaching concerning the universality of Christ's kingdom and the responsibility of Christians in extending that kingdom have immense missionary implications.

*The Victory and Universality of Christ's Kingdom Throughout the World.*

The idea of the victory and future universality of Christ's kingdom throughout the world is a frequently repeated theme in Calvin.<sup>1</sup> The Father has appointed Christ to "rule from sea to sea, and from the rivers even to the ends of the earth."<sup>2</sup> The Lord will show "not only in one corner, what true religion is. . .but He will send forth His voice to the extreme limits of the earth."<sup>3</sup> Jesus did not come to reconcile a few individuals only to God but "to extend His grace over all the world."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the Holy Spirit descended to "reach all the ends and extremities of the world."<sup>5</sup> Innumerable offspring "who shall be spread over the whole earth" shall be born to Christ.<sup>6</sup> No ordinary sized place then is sufficient to hold the people whom God is going to gather "from all parts of the world into one church" ("Enlarge the space of your tents. . ." Isa 54:2).<sup>7</sup> This is a basic element in Calvin's thought—"the fact that the whole world belongs to the Kingdom of Christ and has come under His redemption<sup>8</sup> and that the triumph of Christ will soon be manifest everywhere among all nations."

<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 20, 41, 42; *Commentaries*, Psalm 2:8, 21:8, 28:57, 45:16, 47:8, 72:8, 110:2, Matthew 6:10, 12:31 and John 13:31f.; Karlfried Frohlich, *Gottesreich, Welt und Kirche bei Calvin* (Munich: Verlag von Ernst Reinhardt, 1930), pp. 19f.; H. Quistrop, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1955), pp. 114f.; T. F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), pp. 90f.; R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), pp. 110f.

<sup>2</sup>*Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France, Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I, 12.

<sup>3</sup>*Commentary* on Micah 4:3; see also *Commentary* on Isaiah 62:11.

<sup>4</sup>*Sermon* on 1 Timothy 2:5f.; see also *Commentary* on Isaiah 2:4.

<sup>5</sup>*Sermon* on Acts 2:1-4.

<sup>6</sup>*Commentary* on Psalm 110:3.

<sup>7</sup>*Commentary* on Isaiah 54:2; see also *Reply to Sadoletto, Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. by J. K. S. Reid, Vol. XXII of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 231.

<sup>8</sup>Torrance, *Kingdom and Church*, p. 161.

*The Means of Extending Christ's Kingdom Throughout the World*

*Missions is God's work—not ours—but God uses us as His instruments.*

In the parable of Matthew 13:24-30, Calvin points to the fact that it is Christ who sows the good seed: His plow is driven through all the world and He sows everywhere the seed of life.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is not “by human means, but by heavenly power. . . that the Lord will gather His church.”<sup>10</sup>

The gospel, however, “does not fall from the clouds like rain . . . but is brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it.”<sup>11</sup> God “uses our work and summons us to be His instruments in cultivating His field.”<sup>12</sup> . . . The power to save rests with God but He displays and unfolds His salvation in our preaching of the gospel.<sup>13</sup> It is the “mission of God” which causes our mission.<sup>14</sup> We are His “co-workers.”<sup>15</sup> God chooses to use us in His work both to honor us and to challenge us. God, out of his free liberality, confers upon us “the honor of constituting His own Son governor over the whole world.”<sup>16</sup> The “ordinary method of collecting a church” is by the outward voice of men; “for though God might bring each person to himself by a secret influence, yet He employs the agency of men, that he may awaken in them an anxiety about the salvation of each other.”<sup>17</sup> God takes human agency so seriously that in some sense He is limited by it. Calvin wrote to Heinrich Bullinger: “. . . nothing retards so much the progress of Christ's kingdom as the paucity of ministers.”<sup>18</sup> And yet the last word cannot be one of human endeavour. It is the Lord who “causes the voice of the gospel to resound not only in one place, but far and wide throughout the whole world.”<sup>19</sup> Behind our failures and successes, there is God's plan. “. . . it was not at random that the doctrine of the gospel was preached to all nations, but by the decree of God. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

*We must earnestly desire and pray daily for the extension of Christ's kingdom.*

“. . . it is evident what is the desire which ought to be cherished among

<sup>9</sup>*Commentary* on Matthew 13:24-30.

<sup>10</sup>*Commentary* on Matthew 24:30.

<sup>11</sup>*Commentary* on Romans 10:15.

<sup>12</sup>*Commentary* on Matthew 13:24-30.

<sup>13</sup>*Institutes* IV, 1, 5.

<sup>14</sup>*Commentary* on Romans 10:14-17.

<sup>15</sup>*Institutes*, IV, 1, 6.

<sup>16</sup>*Commentary* on Psalm 2:8.

<sup>17</sup>*Commentary* on Isaiah 2:3.

<sup>18</sup>Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), IV, 263.

<sup>19</sup>*Commentary* on Isaiah 49:2.

<sup>20</sup>*Commentary* on Isaiah 45:22.

all the godly. It is that the goodness of God may be made known to all. . . ."<sup>21</sup> "We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth. . . ."<sup>22</sup> The Christian community is to pray for the conversion of the heathen.<sup>23</sup>

Although God's work does not depend on our prayers, still we ought to pray that "His kingdom come," and by so doing "testify and profess ourselves servants and children of God . . . deeply committed . . . to his honor."<sup>24</sup>

*We must not be discouraged at the lack of visible evidence of the extension of God's kingdom.*

. . . our Lord exercises the faith of His children, in that He doth not out of hand perform the things which He had promised them. And this thing ought specially to be applied to the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ. God had declared beforehand, that the redemption of the world should be wrought by one that was to come of the tribe of Judah. . . . If God pass over a day or a year . . . it is not for us to give over, but we must in the meanwhile pray and not doubt but that He heareth our voice.<sup>25</sup>

Our prayers will not be in vain, for "Christ shall manifestly exercise the power given to Him for our salvation and for that of the whole world."<sup>26</sup>

*We must work for the extension of Christ's kingdom.*

Our salvation includes the missionary obligation. "We are called by the Lord on this condition, that everyone 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 that are without."<sup>27</sup> We are reconciled to

<sup>21</sup>*Commentary* on Isaiah 12:4-5.

<sup>22</sup>*Institutes*, III, 20, 42; see also *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, I, 320.

<sup>23</sup>*Sermon* on Deuteronomy 33:18-19; *Commentary* on Isaiah 12:4-5. Calvin himself prays: "May we daily solicit thee in our prayers and never doubt, but that under the government of thy Christ, thou canst again gather together the whole world. . . ." (*Commentary* on Micah 7:10-14). He concludes the prayer which follows each of the Deuteronomy sermons (in somewhat varying form): ". . . that it may please Him to grant this grace, not only to us, but also to all peoples and nations of the earth."

<sup>24</sup>*Institutes*, III, 20, 43.

<sup>25</sup>*Sermon* on Deuteronomy 33:7-8.

<sup>26</sup>*Commentary* on Micah 7:10-14.

<sup>27</sup>*Commentary* on Hebrews 10:24.

God "in order that each should endeavour to make his brethren partakers of the same benefit."<sup>28</sup> ". . . it is not enough for every man to occupy himself in the service of God; but that our zeal must extend yet further, to the drawing of other men thereunto. . . . We must as much as lieth in us endeavour to draw all men on earth unto God. . . ." <sup>29</sup>Therefore, for Calvin, a Christian actively engages in the work of extending Christ's kingdom.

*Motivations for Extending Christ's Kingdom Throughout the World*

Calvin multiplied motivations which inspire, encourage and produce missionary activity.

We have the *example of God*. Therefore, we should have our arms extended, as He has, towards those outside.<sup>30</sup>

Our desire for the *glory of God* must result in witness. The Christian desires to extend God's truth everywhere that "God may be glorified."<sup>31</sup>

Our witness is *pleasing to God*. Calvin wrote to a Christian on the island of Jersey: "And you know that it is a sacrifice well pleasing to God to advance the spread of the gospel. . . ." <sup>32</sup>It is in God's sight something of great value. To the five students who had been captured in their attempt to preach in France and sentenced to death in Lyons, Calvin wrote: ". . . seeing that [God] employs your life in so worthy a cause as is the witness of the gospel, doubt not that it must be precious to Him."<sup>33</sup>

We are to witness because it is *commanded by Christ*. During the crisis produced by the threatening letter of Charles IX, Calvin and the pastors of Geneva stated to the Council that they had indeed sent men into France to preach the Gospel "as our Lord commands."<sup>34</sup> Christ, however, does more than command us. "We should remember that the gospel is preached not only by the command of Christ but at His urging and leading. . . ." <sup>35</sup>

Therefore, it is *our responsibility and duty* to preach the gospel. ". . . it is very just that we should labour. . . to further the progress of the gospel . . . ." <sup>36</sup> ". . . it is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Commentary* on Psalm 32:8.

<sup>29</sup> *Sermon* on Deuteronomy 33:18, 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Sermon* on Ephesians 4:15-16.

<sup>31</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, IV, 169; *Sermon* on 1 Tim. 2:5-6; *Sermon* on Deuteronomy 33:18, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, II, 453.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 407.

<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563* (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1956), p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Commentary* on Matthew 13:24-30.

<sup>36</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, II, 453.

<sup>37</sup> *Commentary* on Isaiah 12:5.

We are further motivated to missions by *gratitude to God* for what He has done for us. The Christian who is indebted to God's mercy is bound to become, like the psalmist, "the loud herald of the grace of God" to all men.<sup>38</sup> We ought to be inflamed with the desire that the goodness of God may be made known to all "after having been delivered from some alarming danger, and most of all after having been delivered from the tyranny of the devil and from everlasting death."<sup>39</sup>

*Compassion* for the condition of people also drives us to witness. Our love "ought to extend to the whole human race."<sup>40</sup> We have no reason to refuse to help any person who needs us.<sup>41</sup> Our compassion for those without God is heightened by our knowledge that "God cannot be sincerely called upon by others than those to whom, through the preaching of the gospel, His kindness and gentle dealings have become known. . . ."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, even on the ground of humanity we must seek to bring all men on earth to the knowledge of God.<sup>43</sup>

A Christian who is not involved in witness is a contradiction. ". . . 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 . . . within his own breast."<sup>44</sup> To be careless about bringing unbelievers to Christ is not only to show lack of concern for God's honor and to set limits to His kingdom but also is to obscure the scope and power of the death of Christ and to decrease the dignity which has been given to Him by God the Father.<sup>45</sup> We must help those in distress or be ourselves unacceptable to God.<sup>46</sup> And yet many remain indifferent to the work of spreading the gospel. Calvin wrote to Nicholas Radziwill, a nobleman in Poland:

Unquestionably you see that it is a work of immense difficulty to establish the heavenly reign of God upon earth. . . . You see . . . with what indifference that cause is treated, which ought not only to occupy the chief place among our cares, but even absorb all our thoughts. This last fault arises from the sentiment, which almost all men entertain, that the pains which they bestow on Christ's service are purely gratuitous, and hence they turn their attention to other occupations, from which honors and emolument are held out as the reward of their labors.<sup>47</sup>

---

38 *Commentary* on Psalm 51:16.

39 *Commentary* on Isaiah 12:4-5.

40 *Commentary* on 1 Thessalonians 3:12.

41 *Institutes*, III, 7, 6.

42 *Ibid.*, III, 20, 11.

43 *Sermon* on Deuteronomy 33:18-19.

44 *Commentary* on Isaiah 2:3.

45 *Sermon* on 1 Timothy 2:5-6.

46 *Sermon* on Deuteronomy 24:10-13.

47 Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, III, 135.

The Christian works for the extension of Christ's kingdom by both word and deed. It is the word of the gospel which is "a testimony to all nations"<sup>48</sup> and which leads "all nations to the obedience of faith."<sup>49</sup> Whenever the prophets foretold "the renewal of the church or its extension over the whole globe," they always assigned "the first place to the Word."<sup>50</sup> To witness by word must be added witness by deed. Christians should live in this world as "conspicuous marks and, as it were, visible escutcheons of His glory which may serve to conduct us to Himself."<sup>51</sup> The words of Micah: "They shall say, Come, and let us ascend to the mount of Jehovah," show "that the faithful will be so solicitous about the salvation of their brethren that they will strenuously run themselves, and that they prescribe nothing to others but what they themselves perform."<sup>52</sup> God will use the faithful example of His people. Calvin wrote to the five prisoners in Lyons: "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>53</sup>

Calvin clearly teaches that every Christian must witness by word and deed to God's grace to all people to whom God sends him and whom God sends to him. He does not distinguish between the responsibility of ministers and of other Christians in the spreading of the gospel. All Christians must be involved. Certainly there is here the basis for powerful missionary activity on the part of the whole church.

It is quite clear that for Calvin the office of the apostle was both missionary and temporary. He says that the nature of the apostles' function is set forth by the command: "Go and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15).<sup>54</sup> The apostles have no set limits. "The whole is assigned to them to bring into obedience to Christ."<sup>55</sup> They are "to disseminate the gospel where it has not yet been preached."<sup>56</sup> Calvin warns against making "a general rule of what belongs particularly to the apostolic office."<sup>57</sup> The apostles are the founders of the church "while the pastors who succeed them have the duty of protecting and also increasing the structure which they have erected."<sup>58</sup> The apostles did not fill an

48 *Commentary* on Matthew 24:14.

49 *Commentary* on Romans 16:26.

50 *Reply to Sadoleto, Calvin: Theological Treatises*, p. 230.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Commentary* on Micah 4:1-2.

53 Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, II, 406.

54 *Institutes*, IV, 3, 4; see also *Institutes*, IV, 8, 4, *Commentary* on Matthew 28:16-20, *Commentary* on Romans 1:5.

55 *Institutes*, IV, 3, 4.

56 *Commentary* on Romans 15:20.

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*

ordinary and permanent office in the church but one that was raised up by the Lord "at the beginning of His kingdom."<sup>59</sup> The office of apostle (along with that of prophet) was "only for that time during which churches were to be erected where none existed before. . . ."<sup>60</sup> It is, therefore, "extraordinary" and has no present place "in duly constituted churches."<sup>61</sup>

Contrary to a common sixteenth century view, Calvin did not assert that the missionary task had already been fulfilled by the apostles themselves. He saw that they made only a beginning in spreading God's kingdom throughout the world. ". . . the apostles certainly did not travel over the whole world. In fact, it is probable that none of the twelve ever passed into Europe. . . ."<sup>62</sup> "The kingdom of Christ was only begun in the world, when God commanded the gospel to be everywhere proclaimed, and. . . at this day its course is not as yet completed. . . ."<sup>63</sup> The preaching of the gospel is therefore not limited in time but must be carried out "to the world's end."<sup>64</sup>

Calvin's position concerning the apostolate and the missionary command was both polemically and theologically conditioned. His fear of the Catholic doctrine of "apostolic succession" undoubtedly influenced his handling of the apostolic office. In turning Matthew 28:18-20 into a polemic against Rome, however, Calvin did not flatly deny apostolic succession but denied the Roman claim to that succession because "no one can be a successor of the apostles unless he uses his labors for Christ in preaching the gospel."<sup>65</sup> Fear of Anabaptist irresponsibility and disorder arising from their use of the command of Christ to go everywhere and preach the gospel also may have affected Calvin's view of the apostolate. His own concern for proper vocation and legitimate ministry is well known.<sup>66</sup> Calvin's exegesis also reflected his theological concerns. He believed that the office of apostle with its special relationship to Christ and its particular characteristics, including revelation and miracles, was not designed to be continued in the church but was given for the founding and establishing period.

---

<sup>59</sup> *Institutes*, IV, 3, 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Calvin rejected what he acknowledged as a common view concerning Romans 10:18f. — that Paul transferred to the apostles what the Psalmist had said of the heavens: "Their voice has gone out to all the world." "The Psalmist is not speaking in that passage of apostles but of the voiceless works of God. . . ." (*Commentary* on Romans 10:18f.); *Commentary* on Galatians 2:9.

<sup>63</sup> *Commentary* on Micah 4:3.

<sup>64</sup> *Sermon* on Deuteronomy 18:9-15.

<sup>65</sup> *Commentary* on Matthew 28:16-10.

<sup>66</sup> Bonnet, *Letters to John Calvin*, III, 106.

The desire to extend Christ's kingdom is prominent in Calvin's writings, as is the necessity for Christians to be engaged in this work by word and deed, but the means the church must use or can use to reach the ends of the earth is not as clear. If the gospel must be preached to all the world, and the task is not yet complete, and the office of the apostle is no longer valid, who is going to do it and how?

A partial answer to the above question and another element in Calvin which both reveals his intense desire for the extension of Christ's kingdom and at the same time obscures the church's missionary function is his view of the *Corpus Christianum*. A political expansion of Protestant power means to him an expansion of the kingdom of Christ. He wrote to Farel in 1539: "If the Elector [of Saxony] can induce him [the Duke of Cleves] to declare for the reformed religion, it will greatly enlarge the kingdom of Christ. . . ."67

Calvin recognized the possibility of a Christian government which stands along with the church under the dominion of God and which has, like the church, as its task the promotion of God's kingdom and his glory. Church and state are to cooperate in extending Christ's rule.

Magistrates for Calvin "have a commission from God; they are invested with divine authority, and in fact represent the person of God."68 Calvin reminded Francis I that a true king recognizes himself as "a minister of God in governing his kingdom."69 It is therefore the task of the Christian ruler to introduce and extend the true religion to all his subjects. In the *Preface to Olivetan's New Testament (Epistle to the Faithful Showing that Christ is the End of the Law)*, Calvin is most specific about the role of "kings, princes, and Christian lords" in spreading the gospel throughout their realms.70 He describes Christian rulers as successors and imitators of the apostles who had the charge to preach the gospel everywhere. God will hold rulers responsible for the spiritual condition of the people in their countries. He concludes his exhortation with a strong appeal:

It is the will of the Lord of lights by His Holy Spirit, by means of this holy and saving gospel, to teach the ignorant, to strengthen the feeble, to illumine the blind, to make His truth to reign among all peoples and nations, to the end that the whole world may know but one God and one Savior, Jesus Christ, one faith, and one gospel.71

---

67 *Ibid.*, I, 128.

68 *Institutes*, IV, 20, 4.

69 *Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France*, *Institutes*, I, 12.

70 *Calvin: Commentaries*, ed. by Joseph Haroutunian, Vol. XXIII of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 71.

71 *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

This special responsibility for the spread of the gospel is assigned to rulers because it is inherent in the nature of their office and because greater honor requires in this as in other things greater responsibility: "The greater the eminence above others which any man has received from his calling, so much the more diligently ought he to labor to enlighten others."<sup>72</sup> This does not lessen the responsibility of other Christians but it heightens that of rulers. "This is an office every man must fulfill but it belongs to [kings, princes and Christian lords] especially to see to it that the gospel is heard . . . ."<sup>73</sup> Calvin by no means extends the full delegation of this task of the church to rulers, but he does extend to them an important responsibility in the spread of the gospel.

The prevailing concept of church and state required some form of government-controlled missions as a general procedure for spreading the gospel. However, as we shall see later, Calvin did not bind himself to this concept to such an extent that when a government would not or could not act to promote and extend the gospel within its realm, there were no alternatives. This role of government in the extension of the gospel did not mean for Calvin an abandonment of the task by the church. It could mean the fulfillment of the task by an instrument which was seen as given by God to promote His kingdom and to serve the church as its "nursing father."<sup>74</sup> Where this instrument, however, was not available for the spread of the gospel, other means were sought.

Calvin fully realized the difficulty of the missionary task. He wrote to Nicholas Radziwill: "Unquestionably you see that it is a work of immense difficulty to establish the heavenly reign of God upon earth. . . ."<sup>75</sup> In fact, he says, it seemed an almost impossible assignment: "Today, when God wishes His gospel to be preached in the whole world, so that the world may be restored from death to life, He seems to ask for the impossible. We see how greatly we are resisted everywhere and with how many and what potent machinations Satan works against us, so that all roads are blocked by the princes themselves."<sup>76</sup>

In the face of these powerful obstacles, Calvin advocated a Biblical realism and unshakable trust in God.

We are to make full use of the opportunities that God does give us. The

<sup>72</sup> *Commentary* on Isaiah 2:3; see also Calvin's letter to the King of Poland: "For when Christ wishes even his humblest disciples to be like lamps suspended in a lofty place, that send out their light to a distance, what does He require of a king, whom He has placed at the summit of human dignity, that He might shine before all others?" Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, III, 100.

<sup>73</sup> *Epistle to the Faithful Showing that Christ is the End of the Law*, Calvin: *Commentaries*, p. 72.

<sup>74</sup> *Commentary* on Isaiah 49:23.

<sup>75</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, III, 135.

<sup>76</sup> *Commentary* on Genesis 17:23.

tribes of Zebulon and Issachar were placed "in the borders or outlets of Jewry" and were "mingled with the Gentiles and heathen folk, that they should not forbear to provoke their neighbours to serve God." Calvin applied this by saying: "Be we then sometimes among the idolaters? Let us labor as much as in us lieth to win them to God and to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>77</sup> ". . . when an opportunity for edification presents itself, we should realize that a door has been opened for us by the hand of God in order that we may introduce Christ into that place and we should not refuse to accept the generous invitation that God thus gives us."<sup>78</sup>

What are we to do when opportunities are restricted and doors are closed to our witness? We should not persist in trying to do what cannot be done, but seek other opportunities. "The door is shut when there is no hope of success. Thus when the door is shut we have to go a different way rather than wear ourselves out in vain efforts to get through it. . . ."<sup>79</sup> In every situation we are to do what we can, however. Calvin wrote to a church in France facing severe restrictions and persecutions to tell them that every precaution was justifiable but that even in their hard situation witness was essential. "Let every one strive to attract and win over to Jesus Christ those whom he can. . . ."<sup>80</sup> We can trust God that He will use our zealous service. ". . . each man must perform his duty without yielding to any impediment. At the end our effort and our labors shall not fail; they shall receive the success which does not yet appear."<sup>81</sup>

#### *Missiological Practice*

It was Calvin's missionary urge, strengthened by his conviction of the irresistible triumph of Christ, that accounted for the work which he undertook from Geneva, arduously seeking to establish the heavenly reign of Christ everywhere.<sup>82</sup> Under Calvin, Geneva became much more than a haven and a school. It became "a dynamic center or nucleus from which the vital missionary energy it generated radiated out into the world beyond."<sup>83</sup> Calvin fully recognized the strategic missionary value of Geneva. He explicitly linked Geneva and missions in a letter to Bullinger: ". . . when I consider how very important this corner is for the propagation of the

<sup>77</sup> *Sermon* on Deuteronomy 33:18, 19.

<sup>78</sup> *Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 2:12.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, "To the Brethren of Poitou," III, 70.

<sup>81</sup> *Commentary* on Genesis 17:23.

<sup>82</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, III, 134.

<sup>83</sup> Philip E. Hughes, "John Calvin: Director of Missions," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. by John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), p. 45.

kingdom of Christ, I have good reason to be anxious that it should be carefully watched over. . . .”<sup>84</sup> Calvin’s great desire that the gospel go out from Geneva to the world is reflected in a sermon on 1 Timothy: “May we attend to what God has enjoined upon us, that He would be pleased to show His grace, not only to one city or a little handful of people, but that He would reign over all the world; that everyone may serve and worship Him in truth.”<sup>85</sup>

What then happened in Geneva when the doors for missions were opened? When there were opportunities to spread Christ’s kingdom, did the powerful missions dynamic in Calvin respond to the challenge offered to it?

### *Missionary Efforts in France*

France was a missionary challenge, and it was accessible. Reformed churches were forming and calling for pastors from Geneva. There were French refugees in Geneva, serving as pastors or studying theology. The door to France, however, was not fully open. A mission to that country had to contend with religious and political hostilities which constantly endangered the missionaries and threatened Geneva itself. But there was an opening, small as it was, and Calvin and his colleagues made the most of it. The vigorous Genevan response to this opportunity to extend Christ’s kingdom in France is a thrilling chapter in the history of missions.

After the great theological battles over excommunication and predestination, which culminated in 1555 with the victory of the supporters of Calvin, the major portion of the minutes of the Company of Pastors in Geneva is concerned with missionary enterprises outside of Geneva.<sup>86</sup> The account of this mission activity is far from complete and restricted in the main to the years between 1555 and 1562. This does not mean that no missionary activity occurred outside these years but during this period the Company was able to carry on a more formal and systematic missionary effort and also probably felt that the names of missionaries might be recorded with some degree of safety. Before 1555 some men had been sporadically and privately sent out, usually by Calvin himself, to carry the gospel to other countries. The outbreak of the wars of religion in France in 1562 made it necessary to curtail the mission operation or at least discontinue the recording of the names and destinations of the missionary pastors. *The Register of the Company of Pastors* mentions by name eighty-eight men who were sent out from Geneva as missionaries.<sup>87</sup> This, however, is far

---

<sup>84</sup> Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, II, 227.

<sup>85</sup> *Sermon* on 1 Timothy 3:14f.

<sup>86</sup> *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, ed. and trans. by Philip E. Hughes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966).

<sup>87</sup> Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming Wars of Religion in France*, p. 135.

from a full list. The incompleteness of the *Register* can be gauged from a consideration of the year 1561—which appears to have been the peak year for missionary activity. The *Register* records the dispatch of only twelve men, whereas evidence from other sources indicates that in 1561 alone at least one hundred and forty two men ventured forth on their respective missions.<sup>88</sup>

The degree of commitment of Calvin and the pastors of Geneva to this missionary outreach is nothing less than amazing. It seems to have occupied most of the Company's time from 1557 through 1562. Practically every page of the *Register* is devoted to lists of elected men and to various matters pertaining to assignments and continuing contact. Despite the gaps and omissions of the Company's minutes, "they still provide the impression that the pastors were really absorbed in their supervision of the missionary campaign."<sup>89</sup>

The missionaries sent out by the Company were almost all originally from France, most having come to Geneva as refugees. They found that Geneva was more than a haven—it was a school.<sup>90</sup> Here the prospective missionaries were given thorough training which "must have been exceptionally effective in teaching them not only how to do their pastoral work well, but also how to co-operate with one another with uncommon efficiency."<sup>91</sup> After examination the missionary was selected for a certain assignment. After 1555 this was always in response to a formal request from a church needing a pastor, although in many cases the receiving church was barely organized and in most cases fighting for survival. Most of the missionaries were sent to various parts of France, including the islands of the coast of Saintonge, near La Rochelle; others went to the Piedmontese valleys of Northern Italy, Turin, Antwerp, the island of Jersey, London and, as we shall see in the next section, Brazil.

How shall we evaluate this mission to France?

First, it was a legitimate mission of the church and not a matter of Genevan foreign policy (although it came to have significant political implications). This is clear from the response of the Council and the pastors to the letter of Charles IX in 1561. The French king had protested to the

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2, pp. 79f. An exact record is difficult to establish because one man may be listed several times in connection with different missions and often under different names.

<sup>89</sup> Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming Wars of Religion in France*, p. 31.

<sup>90</sup> "The most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles" —in the well-known words of John Knox. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 178.

<sup>91</sup> Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming Wars of Religion in France*, p. 14. Mackinnon says that the founding of the Academy was in part actuated by the desire to provide a supply of trained evangelical missionaries. James Mackinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), p. 196.

Genevan Council that the dissensions which had been disturbing his reign for some time had their source in the preachers sent from Geneva. It was the Company of Pastors and not the Council which accepted responsibility for the mission. The answer of the Council to the King (written by Calvin) admitted that the Company had answered requests for ministers but denied that it was in any way responsible for the troubles in France, since the Word of God did not allow for that kind of activity. Given the content of this letter to Charles IX and Calvin's own views concerning revolution, it is unlikely that the mission to France was a political mission to overthrow the government. It was rather a spiritual mission "to advance the knowledge of the gospel in France, as our Lord commands" (to use the very words of the Pastors to the Council during the crisis).<sup>92</sup>

Secondly, it was a missionary enterprise even though it was largely a response to requests from churches for pastors. The Genevan mission vigor was in itself partially responsible for the very requests as it created a sense of hope and expectancy in France. Gustav Warneck, who sees little missionary zeal among the Reformers, admits that in the spread of Protestantism throughout Europe, the Reformation "may be said to have carried on a mission work at home on an extensive scale."<sup>93</sup> The fact that in one sense the mission to France was "home" missions does not minimize its force. The mission of the church is going out into the world, and for Calvin and the Reformers the "world" was within the lands of Christendom as well as without. The important point is that for the Genevan church France and Europe were open doors, and that church, fortified by Calvin's missiological theology, zealously responded with vigorous missionary activity.

#### *Missionary Efforts in Brazil*

We have seen that Calvin's understanding of the kingdom of Christ is universal in its scope and missionary in its implications. But how did Calvin specifically react to missions to the heathen in distant and non-Christian lands?

Calvin knew that there were nations and peoples who had not as yet heard the gospel. He spoke of the "Antipodes" and other remote nations which did not have "even the faintest word of Christ."<sup>94</sup> His knowledge of pagan nations was taken largely from the Bible and classical literature. There is no proof that he ever came in touch with the newly discovered

---

<sup>92</sup> Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming Wars of Religion in France*, p. 34.

<sup>93</sup> Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions*, p. 8.

<sup>94</sup> *Commentary on Matthew 24:14*.

world of Asian and African paganism, but he was in contact with the Indians of South America through the Geneva mission to Brazil—the *earliest Protestant missionary venture in Latin America!*<sup>95</sup>

Nicolas Durand, also called Villegagnon, with the aid of Huguenot sympathizer, Gaspard de Coligny, and the support of Henry II, undertook a colonial expedition to Brazil in 1555. The colonists included former prisoners and some well-known Huguenots. When trouble occurred in the new island colony, near Rio de Janeiro, Villegagnon turned to the Huguenots in France for better settlers, sending appeals to Coligny and to Calvin and the church in Geneva. The letter to Geneva is not preserved and there is only a brief summary of the affairs of the Company of Pastors for the period, since the secretary was then mortally ill. Calvin was away in Frankfurt at the time. Jean de Léry, shoemaker and student of theology in Geneva, who was soon to join the Brazilian colony, gave the content of Villegagnon's letter in his *Journal*:

The letter asked that the church of Geneva send Villegagnon immediately ministers of the Word of God and with them numerous other persons "well instructed in the Christian religion" in order better to reform him and his people and "to bring the savages to the knowledge of their salvation."<sup>96</sup>

The question of missions to the heathen was thus set squarely before the church of Geneva. Jean de Léry gave its reaction:

Upon receiving these letters and hearing this news, the church of Geneva at once gave thanks to God for the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ in a country so distant and likewise so foreign and among a nation entirely without knowledge of the true God.<sup>97</sup>

The Company of Pastors then chose two ministers to send to Brazil. This momentous decision and undertaking is cryptically noted in the Register:

On Tuesday 25 August [1556], in consequence of the receipt of a letter requesting this church to send ministers to the new islands [Brazil], which

---

<sup>95</sup> The story of the Brazilian mission is handled carefully and fully by R. Pierce Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," from which much of the material in this section is taken. See also Baez-Camargo, "The Earliest Protestant Missionary Venture in Latin America," *Church History*, XXI (1952), 135-145. The most important primary source of information concerning the mission is the contemporary journal of Jean de Léry, *Journal de Bord de Jean de Léry en la terre de Bresil* (1557), published in 1578 under the title, *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre de Bresil*. There have been several other editions of de Léry's journal since the sixteenth century.

<sup>96</sup> See Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," p. 16.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

the French had conquered, M. Pierre Richer [sic] and M. Guillaume Charretier were elected. These two were subsequently commended to the care of the Lord and sent off with a letter from this church.<sup>98</sup>

Eleven laymen were also recruited for the colony, including Jean de Léry.

Although Calvin was not in Geneva at this time, he was kept informed of everything of importance that was happening and gave his advice. There is no doubt that he was consulted about the mission, because the leaders carried letters from him to Villegagnon.

The rest of the story is a tragic one. Villegagnon erratically changed his mind toward Calvin and the Reformation, killing some of the Calvinists and forcing others to flee. This ended the short-lived mission to the Indians. There was no statistical fruit in conversion but contact was made with the Indians which revealed substantial missionary thinking and strategy.

The first acquaintance with the Indians was discouraging. Pastor Richier wrote to Calvin in April 1557 that the savages were characterized by unimaginable barbarism.<sup>99</sup> "The result is we are frustrated in our hope of revealing Christ to them." Richier was not prepared to abandon the mission, however. He told Calvin that they would try to advance by stages and wait patiently for the six young boys who were placed with the Indians (the Tupinambas) to learn their language. "Since . . . the Most High has given us this task, we expect this Edom to become a future possession for Christ." Meanwhile, he would hope for a good witness by example before the Indians on the part of pious and industrious members of the Reformed Church in the colony. Richier strikingly reproduces many of the themes which we have found in Calvin's missionary thought—obedience to God in doing what is possible in a difficult situation, trust in God to create opportunities for further witness, the importance of the lives and actions of Christians as a means of witness, and confidence that God will advance His kingdom.

Jean de Léry closely observed the Tupinambas and lived with them on occasion. He wrote: ". . . it is my opinion that if Villegagnon had not turned against the Reformed religion, and if we had been able to remain in that country for a longer time, we would have drawn and won over some of them to Christ."<sup>100</sup> He was fully aware of the evils among the Indians, but he appreciated their good qualities and was quite skillful in seizing opportunities for witness and in translating the gospel into simple terms for these people. A legend of the Indians—that a white stranger long ago had visited their land and told their ancestors the very same teaching about God—raised for de Léry the question whether this might have been one of the

---

<sup>98</sup> Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, p. 317.

<sup>99</sup> See Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," p. 17 (CR 44, 433, 434).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18f. (*Journal of Jean de Léry*, pp. 343f.).

twelve apostles. The view was already widely held in de Léry's time that the Great Commission had been addressed by Christ solely to the apostles, who then had actually preached the gospel through the whole world. Whatever the truth of the theory, de Léry believed that the churches of Europe were not devoid of responsibility toward the savages. This theology student from Geneva clearly accepted the missionary task as binding on contemporary Christians.

Warneck warns that one must guard against magnifying this Brazil venture into a great missionary effort on the part of the Reformed church.<sup>101</sup> Although it was a solitary example of missions to the heathen, was connected with a colonizing venture, and evidently failed to convert any Indians to Christ, it had an historical importance which must not be minimized. Beaver says: "The Church of Geneva when confronted with a challenge to undertake mission responded immediately. The circumstantial evidence points to Calvin's approbation."<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, it is possible to see reflected in the attitudes and plans of Richier, colleague of Calvin, and de Léry, student of Calvin, something of the Geneva Reformer's own missionary zeal.

#### Conclusion

Calvin possessed a considerable missionary interest but that interest was focused and limited by the realities of the sixteenth century. If one comes to Calvin from the standpoint of modern missions, he is disappointed to find relatively little that applies strictly to foreign missions. Coming to Calvin, however, from the standpoint of Protestant missionary thought in the sixteenth century in general or from the point of view of the current, popular negative picture of Calvin and missions, one is amazed at the amount of evangelistic and missionary teaching in him. Samuel Zwemer correctly said: "John Calvin lived in the sixteenth century, not in the nineteenth. We cannot expect of him a world-view and world vision like that of William Carey. But he was not blind or deaf to the heathen world and its needs."<sup>103</sup>

In Calvin the concept that the gospel has to spread throughout the world was very clear; less clearly, however, did he see in what manner this must happen. His full understanding of the means of missions was obstructed by his view pertaining to the relationship of church and state and limited by the difficult position of early Protestantism. If pressed by circumstances, it is conceivable, and even likely, that Calvin would have developed exceptions to his normal church structure (as he did in the case of reformation) to

---

<sup>101</sup> Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions*, p. 23.

<sup>102</sup> Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," p. 20.

<sup>103</sup> Zwemer, "Calvinism and the Missionary Enterprise," p. 207.

create more fully and clearly means of missions to the heathen (as he did in missions to Europe). Calvin's idea of the "open door" and his quick response to opportunities indicate that in a freer setting both his missiological teaching and practice would have developed much more extensively.

It is abundantly clear that John Calvin had a heart for missions—for the extension of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ to the ends of earth. It was his wish that "the kingdom of Christ should flourish everywhere."<sup>104</sup> The cause of establishing "the heavenly reign of God upon earth" was a cause which, according to him, "ought not only to occupy the chief place among our cares, but even absorb all our thoughts."<sup>105</sup> And to this cause Calvin turned his time and energy. In his writings he showed that he longed for and rejoiced in the extension of Christ's rule everywhere. He urged God's people to pray and work toward this goal. In his wide-ranging correspondence, he attempted "to unite the reign of Christ and to extend it over all the world."<sup>106</sup> In his work as preacher and pastor, he sought to be Christ's witness "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Geneva was claimed for God. The gospel was preached in France and in other lands of Europe by missionaries trained and inspired by Calvin. And in far off Brazil, some Indians heard the name of the Lord.

---

104 Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, III, 134.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

106 Frohlich, *Gottesreich, Welt und Kirche bei Calvin*, p. 86.