

John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness

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John Calvin found his place in the annals of ecclesiastical and world history for several important reasons. He was an experienced theologian, a careful exegete, a master philosopher, and one of the most notable leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

Nonetheless, Calvin was above all a preacher, dedicated to the faithful exposition of the Word of God. At the same time, however, this influential reformer was more than a theological preacher. John Calvin passionately employed his preaching skills for the moral, social, and civil welfare of the city of Geneva, eagerly promoting a Christian society in which Jesus Christ reigned over every aspect of the church and state.

Confident that all attempts at social and civil improvement found their principle inspiration in the power of the preached Word, John Calvin utilized his pulpit ministry to transform the character of the city of Geneva “from a city of doubtful moral standing to one of the cleanest, most moral and most intellectual cities of Europe.”¹

Just prior to his arrival in Geneva in July of 1536, John Calvin held a somewhat limited perception of the scope of teaching and preaching. Greatly influenced by his “sudden conversion” to the gospel, brought on in part by the influence of Luther, Zwingli, and Oecolampadius, Calvin was zealous to defend that very same gospel. He considered his duty simply to be a faithful expositor of Scripture for “the unlearned” in the church – those lacking any schooling in Greek, Hebrew, or Latin. However, “Calvin saw neither the office of teacher nor that of interpreter as involving any public work, but rather

¹ Leroy Nixon, John Calvin, Expository Preacher, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 63

pursued a life of quiet retirement.”² Calvin was still very comfortable with his “scholarly” lifestyle, which allowed him to maintain his “somewhat unpolished and bashful” demeanor while hiding away “in some secluded corner” to engage in peaceful study.³

In many ways, we must credit Guillaume Farel for challenging Calvin’s restricted perception of his role as teacher and preacher. The two Frenchmen met for the first time in the summer of 1536. Calvin was on his way to Strasbourg, but a war that had broken out barred the way, forcing him to spend the night in Geneva. During his stay, which Calvin intended to be only a brief one, Farel approached him and, in a most convincing manner, called him to the public ministry of teaching and preaching, and requested his help in the restoration of Genevan society.

Guillaume Farel had been very influential in bringing about the Reformation in Geneva. He arrived in the city in October of 1532, and had an immediate influence on some of its leading citizens. However, Farel also experienced extremely violent opposition from the Roman Catholic authorities. In reaction to his preaching, they sought to throw him out of the city. Within a relatively short time, tension in Geneva mounted as citizens took sides, some in favor of the Reformation and others still in support of the Roman party.⁴ By May 21, 1536, after the Roman clergy proved they were unable to give a good defense of their theological standpoint, the General Council of Geneva officially

2 Randall C. Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 21

3 Ronald S. Wallace, Calvin, Geneva & the Reformation, (Eugene: WS Publishers, 1998), 12

4 *Ibid*, 14

accepted the Reformation, vowing to “live and worship according to the Word of God.”⁵ In addition, Bern, Geneva’s neighboring Protestant protectorate, had freed the city from the Duke of Savoy’s Catholic rule.

However, “it must be admitted that Geneva had reformed in name but not entirely in heart, many of its citizens having wanted rather freedom from the restraints of the old regime than the guidance of the Word of God.” Desperately in need of Calvin’s help, Farel believed strongly that God had providentially brought the timid scholar to Geneva to aid him in reforming the church and city. His charge to Calvin was amazingly blunt – help in the restoration of Geneva, or face the severe wrath of God. Struck with terror, Calvin remarked that “it seemed to him that the ‘hand of God from heaven’ was there arresting him.”⁶ Guillaume Farel had not merely urged Calvin to remain in the city; he had forced him by a command, “which had the supreme power of God’s hand laid violently upon [him] from heaven.”⁷ Perhaps, as Ronald Wallace quips, “we are meant to notice a touch of divine irony in the fact that God used the very shyness which had made Calvin previously shrink from people, now to force him into their service.”⁸

Initially, John Calvin began working in Geneva simply as a teacher, or a “doctor.” Soon, however, it became evident that his preaching skills were of unmatched superiority. Called as a pastor or bishop of the local congregation, Calvin began to devote his full time and energy to the faithful preaching of the Word, as well as to the defense of the Reformation’s influence on the life of his flock and the larger community. Thus, the

⁵ *Ibid*, 15

⁶ *Ibid*, 16

⁷ Randall C. Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 21

⁸ Ronald S. Wallace, Calvin, Geneva & the Reformation, 16

gifted theologian became very active in the life of Geneva, finally realizing that “his teaching would have lost its soul if he had diverted himself into entirely academic secluded scholarship.”⁹

From the onset, however, the zeal of Calvin and Farel for moral reform met with a significant measure of hostility and suspicion from the people of Geneva. After only a few months, the two reformers met with severe opposition from the Geneva Council regarding worship and discipline. Calvin and Farel preached regarding ecclesiastical matters, including sacramental practice and traditional festival observance, that the church must have authority over magisterial control. The council vehemently disagreed with the two foreigners, contending that the civil magistrates could limit even the pulpit ministry. On Easter 1538, the Council of Geneva expelled Calvin and Farel from the city. Calvin resumed his scholarly ways in Strasbourg, where he served a small French congregation and further developed his preaching skills.¹⁰

During Calvin and Farel’s absence, the church in Geneva experienced severe weakening due to internal factions and moral decay. So great were the problems in the Church and city that the ministers hired to replace the two reformers abandoned their posts. In September of 1541, Geneva called John Calvin and Guillaume Farel back to the city, not because of “nostalgic sentiment but the need to shore up the deplorable state of the Church, bereft of its two best ministers.”¹¹

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ William G. Naphy, Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 34

¹¹ *Ibid*, 42

When Calvin returned to Geneva, he had definite ideas for promoting Biblical reconstruction in the city. He would encourage the development of a Christian society, in which those called to civil government served Christ under the authority of God's Word no less meaningfully than those of ministerial position. Calvin believed strongly that "the challenge and power of the Gospel must be allowed to cleanse, regenerate and direct not only the human heart but every aspect of social life on earth – family affairs, education, economics and politics."¹² To bring about such reform in the city of Geneva, Calvin would use the most powerful and influential tool available to him – pulpit preaching.

Resuming his work in Geneva, Calvin's main concern was the overall growth of the Church. Over time, however, the scope of his ministry widened. He found himself compelled not only to guard the health of his flock, but also to ensure the welfare of the city. Calvin described his perception of this calling in 1555 when he wrote, "Life is not dearer to me than the holy bond to which is annexed the public welfare of our city."¹³ The quiet, bashful theologian, who had earlier preferred the consolation of a solitary cubicle, was now passionately employing his gifts as a teacher and preacher for the sanctification of the political and civil affairs of his city.

The annals of Geneva show that Calvin was sincerely concerned about the political, social, moral, and economic well-being of the city. He sought to lead by example, fulfilling the role of a passionate caretaker of the spiritual and physical needs of the citizens of Geneva. Moreover, he believed that godly reform in these areas should be encouraged through his pulpit ministry. Frequently, Calvin would climb the winding

¹² Ronald S. Wallace, Calvin, Geneva & the Reformation, 28

¹³ *Ibid*, 29

staircase leading up to his pulpit mount, and preach a sermon calling the Geneva Council to repent of a misdeed, or to reduce its overassertive attitude toward the Church authorities.¹⁴

On several occasions, Calvin utilized his lofty perch to remind the council of who held true authority regarding ecclesiastical matters. During his ministry, a debate arose concerning the names given to children at their baptism. The ministers of Geneva refused to baptize children with certain names that they believed to be remnants of Roman Catholic superstition and saintly veneration. The sermons preached to warn against such fallacious sentimentality met with great opposition. Despite the uproar, however, John Calvin and his fellow ministers held their ground, maintaining the Church's authority on such decisions. "In this way the Church became an arena for public debate and was constantly rocked by violent disturbances for, in practical terms, the single most important means available to Calvin for shaping Genevan minds and mores was not the Consistory, but the pulpit."¹⁵ From week to week, Calvin and his ministerial partners faithfully preached the Word of God, calling the people of Geneva to godly living and social harmony. "People grew to maturity and their ideas and beliefs took shape under the shadow of Calvin's pulpit. From this platform Calvin was able to direct his verbal assaults against any and all opposition."¹⁶ Truly, the magistrates had their courts and

14 John H. Leith, John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 190

15 William G. Naphy, Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation, 153

16 *Ibid*

private counsels, but Calvin had his pulpit. Thus, he controlled “the only means of mass communication and public indoctrination.”¹⁷

In contrast to what some might think, John Calvin’s preaching could be quite polemical and conversant with political matters. He would frequently appear before the city council during a period of economic decline and request the provision of jobs for the lower class. After making his request, he would “continue to prosecute the matter actively.”¹⁸ In this way, Calvin preached to both his parishioners and the council.

But was Calvin merely a propagandist? Did he misuse his influential position by lobbying his political convictions? Certainly not, for Calvin was a faithful, yet forceful pastor and expositor of God’s Word. His reason for preaching in a somewhat polemical way stemmed from his concern that “the rulers of Geneva refused to accept correction and behave as they were told.”¹⁹ Calvin preached not as a politician, but as a minister fervently maintaining his call to pure and holy living, a call that certainly did not exclude the civil magistrates.

In order to understand fully both the content and impact of Calvin’s sermons, it is necessary to examine the context in which the reformer preached. Unlike contemporary culture, the social order in which Calvin preached was largely committed to Christian principles. Certainly, not everyone in Geneva was a devout believer, but “Christian theology in some broad sense was the frame of reference in which people thought and

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 154

¹⁸ John H. Leith, John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life, 197

¹⁹ William G. Naphy, Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation, 161

lived.”²⁰ Thus, when Calvin preached, he promoted the idea of a Christian society in which the Lordship of Christ and the presence of God would be increasingly evident in all aspects of Genevan life. “This does not mean that Calvin had some kind of blueprint that he was seeking to impose, or that Calvin envisioned some totalitarian or even authoritarian society.”²¹ Rather, he preached for the increased obedience of the people of God to their sovereign Lord. This obedience, Calvin knew very well, “had to be worked out in the context of the given political, social, and economic facts of human existence. Calvin sought ‘to draw the world to God and to build up the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ that he may rule among us.’”²²

At the same time, Calvin fought and preached to maintain the independence of the Church from state control, believing that the state had no right “to make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God.”²³ However, it is terribly inaccurate to say that he promoted a secularized state. Calvin “exempted the state only from the control of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, not from the sovereignty of God.”²⁴ He envisioned a society in which the Church and state worked side by side under the Lordship of Christ for a common goal. In fact, Calvin taught that it was the responsibility of the civil government “to cherish and protect the outward worship of

20 Timothy George and Leith, John H., John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 208

21 *Ibid*, 220

22 *Ibid*

23 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Library of Christian Classics, vol. 2, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), 4.20.3

24 John H. Leith, John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life, 201

God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility.”²⁵

Calvin believed strongly that the Church was responsible to hold the civil magistrates accountable to defend the poor and weak, maintain justice, and govern in a godly manner. This placed the Church “squarely against all economic injustice” and made clear that the “preaching of the gospel is linked with the demand for social justice.”²⁶ Thus, one should not be surprised at Calvin’s polemical and politically informed preaching. Just as the prophets of old preached God’s Word while attacking unfaithful rulers at the same time, so Calvin deemed it the task of a minister to warn public officials when they were at fault. Indeed, in Calvin’s context, it was the duty of the minister, as “the mouth of God,” to “speak out sharply against all injustice, all neglect of duty, all ungodliness in high places.”²⁷

As a churchman, John Calvin held the task of preaching in very high regard. He took great care in preparing his sermons, for he believed preaching to be “the primary means by which God’s presence becomes actual to us and by which God’s work is accomplished in individual life and in the community.”²⁸ Calvin relied heavily on preaching, to be not only a means of grace to his congregation, but also a tool to promote a godly mindset in the community of Geneva. With such a respect for the pulpit ministry,

²⁵ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.20.2

²⁶ W. Fred Graham, The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and his Socio-Economic Impact, (Richmond: John Knox, 1971), 62

²⁷ *Ibid*, 63

²⁸ Timothy George and Leith, John H., John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 206

the reformer was a prolific preacher. In 1541, Calvin followed a rigorous schedule, preaching twice on Sunday, and then three times during the week. Due to popular request, he preached even more the next year. By 1549, however, he began to slow down, still preaching twice every Sunday and every workday, every second week.²⁹

Calvin was very serious about the preacher's task. After all, it is through the faithful exposition of the "spectacles" of Scripture that one rightly understands God's work in creation, and learns of His statutes.³⁰ Calvin's well-known letter to Protector Somerset in 1548 includes some of the elements of preaching he believed to be important. A minister's preaching must be "lively" and interesting, while not making "a parade of rhetoric." Faithful ministers must preach the Word of God, and not resort to "sowing their own silly fancies."³¹ In addition, Calvin understood that the reading and preaching of Scripture stood at the center of obedient worship.³² Thus, he always taught his parishioners how to prepare themselves spiritually and physically for the preaching of the Word, so that they might receive it with a proper attitude.³³

Preaching, Calvin maintained, was the will of God for His Church. Its justification was not in "its effectiveness for education or reform," but rather "in the will and intention of God." Calvin knew that his preaching would offend people at times, and it certainly did. The bold reformer frequently reminded the congregation that "true

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ T.H.L. Parker, Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 22

³¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, vol. 4, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 118

³² *Ibid*, 132

³³ Leroy Nixon, John Calvin, Expository Preacher, 66

religion always reveals itself in neighborly love,” and that social and economic affairs are “important mediums for the expression of faith.”³⁴ When Calvin felt that his parishioners were neglecting their neighborly duties, or were resorting to deceit and trickery, he “never hesitated to denounce fraudulent and oppressive business transactions in his sermons.”³⁵

On one particular occasion, Calvin launched a poignant attack against city merchants in Geneva. He rebuked their dishonest behavior declaring, “On the streets of Geneva you can find more honour and loyalty among the dogs. The shops are dens for thieves who are ever ready to slit a poor man’s throat.”³⁶ In Geneva, a city ruled by the merchant class, such rebuke provoked indignant opposition and even rioting. Sometimes, the people simply did not want to hear Calvin’s messages, preferring sweeter, congratulatory preaching. However, Calvin remained steadfast and faithful to the true preaching of Scripture, regardless of its offense. And what could the people do? “With no popular platform of their own, Genevans opposed to Calvin and his vision of Genevan society were reduced to shouting in the pews, rioting in the streets and complaining in the Councils; none of which could equal the obvious persuasive power of Calvin’s pulpit ministry.”³⁷

Although he knew that the validity of his preaching did not depend on the response it drew, but rather upon the will of God, Calvin was certainly concerned that his

34 John H. Leith, John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life, 191

35 *Ibid*, 192

36 William G. Naphy, Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation, 157

37 *Ibid*, 161

preaching be both edifying and convincing.³⁸ When preaching to the congregation, Calvin made sure to employ his skills as a humanist scholar. Searching out the natural, truest sense of his chosen passage, the talented expositor utilized his instinctive ability to paraphrase texts to make them understandable and accessible to his listeners. “In this most critical task he could paraphrase scripture with precision and clarity, translating it into the language of the common human discourse of his own time. This skill was based on his humanist learning and also on his theological and spiritual depth and insight.”³⁹ Calvin’s innate ability to preach in a clear, pointed, and convincing manner led his colleague, Theodore Beza, to say of his preaching, “Every word weighed a pound.”⁴⁰

Above all, Calvin recognized that the power of his preaching did not reside in the eloquence of the words, but in the power of the Holy Spirit working through them. The electing grace of God alone prompted individuals to understand, accept, and abide by the words spoken from his pulpit. Knowing this, namely, that preaching was both a human work and an instrument of God; Calvin made his preaching simple and accessible. His ultimate goal was to engage the common person sitting in the pew, and to prompt him to love and cherish the Word of God. “To that end, this brilliant man intentionally chose to employ simple words and understandable language. ‘Preachers must be like fathers,’ he writes, ‘dividing bread into small pieces to feed their children.’”⁴¹ Calvin preached

38 Timothy George and Leith, John H., John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform, (Louisville:Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 210

39 *Ibid*, 212

40 Leroy Nixon, John Calvin, Expository Preacher, 34

41 Steven J. Lawson, “The Preacher of God’s Word.” In John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine & Doxology, edited by Burk Parsons, (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2008), 76-7

deliberately, but with a familiar and personal style, convinced that by letting Scripture interpret Scripture, the Holy Spirit would illuminate the minds of his hearers, transforming them for the health of the Church and community, to the glory of God.⁴²

It is insufficient to speak of John Calvin merely as a biblical preacher. His careful attention to faithful hermeneutics and the exposition of Scripture proves that he certainly was that. “He was also a theological preacher who understood human existence in the light of a clearly conceived theological framework and who had a vision of a holy community that fulfilled God’s purposes in history.”⁴³ Less than twenty years after Calvin’s arrival in Geneva, his preaching, prayer, political and social guidance, and even the conflicts they instigated, bore fruit in a unique and historic way. Under the counseling of Calvin from his pulpit, Geneva became what John Knox and many others called “the most perfect school of Christ since the Apostles.”⁴⁴ Calvin not only preached the entire counsel of God in Geneva; he helped to mold a society whose behavior and religion were saturated by the reforming power of the preached Word. John Calvin was many things, but he will long be remembered as the faithful expositor and churchman who believed that “the unfettered preaching of the Word could change Geneva and indeed the whole world.”⁴⁵

42 *Ibid*

43 Timothy George and Leith, John H., John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform, 224

44 Ronald S. Wallace, Calvin, Geneva & the Reformation, 41

45 *Ibid*, 63