

Introduction

John Calvin is known today primarily as a systematic theologian, and this is not without reason. Melancthon, his contemporary, dubbed him, *The Theologian*, not simply one among many but The Theologian *par excellence*. However, Calvin was fundamentally a preacher of the gospel. His theology was worked out and refined as he preached through the Bible book by book, preaching more than four thousand sermons in Geneva.¹ French Huguenots who had fled to Geneva wanted to have his sermons in written form. Since Calvin did not write out a manuscript or even preach from notes, they hired one of their own, Denis Raguénier, to capture the sermons in shorthand and then write them out later. These volumes of sermons became very popular. However, in subsequent centuries the sermons were largely overlooked, and in our day many are not aware of them.² Yet, if you want to understand or appreciate Calvin you must read his sermons. As T. H. L. Parker says, we find Calvin's theology "in its scientific form in the Institutes and in its pastoral form in the Sermons."³

It doesn't take long in his sermons for some of the stereotypes of Calvin to melt away. Here in these lively sermons you find a pastor with deep personal interest in his people, a passion for their faithfulness, a yearning for faithful adherence to God's word, and a zeal for taking the gospel to the nations. As one scholar has said, "it is in the sermons that Calvin must have been most himself: in this direct, eye-to-eye contact with a congregation consisting mostly of refugees

¹ Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 245.

² Parker states, "Calvin's sermons were, in effect, unknown to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to half the nineteenth." *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 74.

³ T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 55.

and looking for a word of encouragement.”⁴ And as Parker says, “the centre of his pastoral work, around which all else resolved, was the preaching of the gospel.”⁵

Calvin began preaching through 1 Timothy on September 16, 1554 and preached from this letter Sunday mornings and afternoons, with some interruptions, until April 1555. T. H. L. Parker has helpfully worked out when each of these sermons were preached and suggests that these sermons are of particular importance because “this was the period of crisis in Geneva, when Calvin’s reforms faced their gravest threat and at last emerged victorious.”⁶ Therefore, in these sermons we do not find a pastor composing at leisure but one struggling to hold on to his ministry in the face of organized resistance, seeking the well-being and maturity of his people despite being misunderstood and attacked by wolves. Here we see him truly at work, and we hear his heart: his yearning for both the good of his people and God’s glory as well as his frustration with the glacial speed of change and rampant apathy among the people of Geneva. His discussions of pastoral ministry in these sermons are therefore all the more interesting, as he makes comments like, “God does not take us to his service as a man would hire his servant for a year or two. . . . We must employ ourselves to the service of God, and of his only Son, forever both to live and die” (Sermon 51).

There is encouragement here for the contemporary preacher. We tend to think giants of the past knew only success. We know that is not true, but the idea slips into our thinking. In these sermons we find Calvin lamenting the apathy of the majority and calling down judgment upon

⁴ Willem van’t Spijker, “Foreword,” in Wulfert de Greef’s *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, expanded edition, trans. Lyle Bierma (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), ix.

⁵ Parker, *Portrait*, 81.

⁶ Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, ix. On pages 165-166 of the same volume Parker provides a chart showing the precise day each of these sermons was preached.

them. And we find him resting his hope in the future revelation of Jesus Christ in all his glory. Preachers today can identify with these challenges and should find encouragement here as well as an example of perseverance. We too must hold fast and faithfully fulfill our task, knowing God is doing more than we can see.

One of the stereotypes which is destroyed by attention to these sermons in particular concerns Calvin and evangelism. Often one finds assertions that Calvin was opposed to or uninterested in evangelism and missions. Others say his theology naturally leads to indifference about the conversion of souls. Despite good work disproving these ideas, the assumption continues.⁷ These sermons on 1 Timothy demonstrate that Calvin was deeply moved by the need for evangelism and world missions. Often he exhorts his people to work and pray for the conversion of their neighbors and to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. This is quite often seen in the prayers at the close of his messages. Calvin movingly presents the evangelistic heart of God in this excerpt from a sermon on 1 Timothy 2:3-5:

let us mark first of all when the Gospel is preached to us that it is just as if God reached out his hand (as he says by the prophet Isaiah, Isa. 65:2) and said to us, "Come to me." It is a matter which ought to touch us to the quick, when we see that God comes to seek us, and does not wait until we come to him, but shows that he is ready to be made at one with us, although we were his daily enemies. He seeks nothing but to wipe out all our faults and make us partakers of the salvation that was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. And thus we see how worthily we have to esteem the Gospel, and what a treasure it is. (Sermon 13)

⁷ E.g., Philip Hughes, "John Calvin: Director of Missions," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 40–54; Ray Van Neste, "John Calvin on Missions and Evangelism," *Founders Journal* 33 (1998): 15–21; Paul Helm, "Calvin, A. M. Toplady, and the Bebbington Thesis," in *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, eds. Michael Haykin and Kenneth Stewart (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 205–8.

Other quotes from these sermons on the theme of evangelism:

“It is not enough for us to teach other men faithfully, unless we have a zeal to edify and care for the salvation of all men, and do it with the affection to honor God and to show the way as an example to those who are led by our doctrine.” (Sermon 9)

“In addition to praying for the faithful, we should also have pity and compassion on the poor unbelievers, asking God to draw them unto us so that all of us may be of one accord. Thus we see what Saint Paul’s meaning is in this place: namely, to show us what the children of God ought to employ themselves in doing, and it is this, that we should not travail unprofitably, but instead call upon God and ask him to work toward the salvation of the whole world, and that we give ourselves to this work both night and day. ” (Sermon 11)

“The greatest pleasure we can do for men is to pray to God for them, and call upon him for their salvation.” (Sermon 11)

“So then let us mark first of all that all who care not whether they bring their neighbors to the way of salvation or not, and those who do not care to bring the poor unbelievers also, instead being willing to let them go to destruction, show plainly that they make no account of God’s honor. . . . And thus we see how cold we are and negligent to pray for those who have need and are this day in the way to death and damnation” (Sermon 14)

“We cannot bestow our lives and our deaths better than by bringing poor souls who were lost, and on their way to everlasting death, to salvation” (Sermon 20)

In more than one way place Calvin speaks of the salvation of our neighbors being “dear to us” (e.g. Sermon 35)

“Let them especially that have charge to preach the word of God, have this zeal and take heed to themselves, and say thus within themselves, “Why has God placed me here?” To the end that church should increase more and more, and the salvation of men be always sought for.” (Sermon 35)

“Our life must speak as well as our tongues, and we must endeavor to walk uprightly, to the end that others may follow us. It is said of all believers that they must draw their neighbors to God in such a way that they must go with them.” (Sermon 36)

“Seeing that God has made you a Minister to save souls, you must employ yourself all the more mightily, and with greater zeal and earnestness.” (Sermon 36)

“He adds this [1 Timothy 4:16] precisely, to the end that we should take good hearts when we see the thanklessness of men, and that we cannot bring them to salvation, as it were to

be wished, yet must we not neglect to devote ourselves and take pains therein.” (Sermon 36)

“But if there are deaf men that cannot hear them, if there are wicked men that refuse to hear them, if there are scoffers that bring all to confusion, what must they [preachers] do? Let them go on still, and call as many to God as they can” (Sermon 36)

“So often as we preach the doctrine of salvation, we show that God is ready to receive all who come to him, that the gate is open to those who call upon him, and to be assured that their inheritance is prepared for them there above, and they can never be deceived of it” (Sermon 54)

I have my disagreements with Calvin, but they do not have to do with our obligation to take the gospel to all the world, calling upon all people to come to Christ and be saved. Perhaps, with these sermons being more accessible, an ungracious misrepresentation of our Christian brother can be laid to rest.

These sermons were translated into English by Laurence Tomson in 1579 (reprinted in facsimile by Banner of Truth), and since then Tomson’s has been the only complete English edition, as far as I am aware. The old font, as well as unclear sections in the facsimile, combined with the changes in the English language over 400 years, made this a very difficult text to read. Brian Denker and I have worked to update this translation to make it accessible to readers today. First, the text was completely retyped. Then I read through the sermons, updating the language. Many words and phrases contained in the 1579 translation are not even in use today and for others the meanings have changed entirely. I have almost lived in the Oxford English Dictionary as I sought to untangle various terms and phrases. Then Alice Catherine Carls rendered invaluable assistance as she worked through the original French text to sort out passages I could not figure out and corrected other places as well. Her appreciation of Calvin’s style and imagery is contagious.

It would, of course, be best if someone prepared a fresh translation from the French edition. However, after checking various sources I found no plans for such a translation. Therefore it seemed fitting to make this treasure trove accessible as soon as possible to modern English readers.

Suggestions for Reading

Perhaps it will be helpful to readers of this large volume to have some suggestions on how to make use of the material found here. One can of course read straight through the sermons, following the train of thought which is often evident (Calvin will often refer to what he had preached earlier in the day). But one can also derive much profit by reading selected sermons according to interest in topics or certain texts. All of these sermons are substantive but some “sing” more than others. This very fact should be encouraging to preachers today as well! Sermon 1 is truly the place to start, as it provides an introduction to the letter and also displays Calvin’s pastoral concern and passionate preaching. He makes application from this text for pastoral ministry that has relevance for us today. Not surprisingly, given the content of 1 Timothy, there are several sermons which are exemplary on the subjects of preaching and pastoral ministry. Sermon 20 gives a compelling picture of pastoral ministry and its burden for souls. Sermons 31 and 34 are particularly good on proper preaching, and Sermon 47 is persuasive that proper teaching edifies the church. Sermon 35 provides an extended discussion of ordination and the purpose of pastoral ministry. Sermon 36 is laden with the themes of evangelism and perseverance in ministry. The last half of Sermon 45 is helpful for overzealous pastors who are anxious for immediate purity in the church. Calvin, of course, says we should

seek purity, but we should also realize God does not expose things all at once. God is taking his own time in the process.

These sermons contain much that is challenging, stirring and comforting for everyday aspects of the Christian life. Sermon 50 is a robust encouragement to perseverance and how the gospel aids us in holding fast. Calvin stresses both the need for human effort as well as the recognition that such effort is rooted in grace. The sermon is theologically rich and pastorally helpful, as Calvin demonstrates how the beauty of the gospel promises drives us forward. This can be a balm for discouraged pastors as well as a strong challenge toward faithfulness and holiness for all Christians. Sermon 9 contains powerful admonitions to stand firm in truth, knowing there will be conflict when you preach or live by God's word. Calvin calls us to arm ourselves well and stand in the faith. Sermon 11 is an especially good sermon on the importance of prayer, stating that it is a non-negotiable mark of believers. Sermons 23, 45, 48, and 49 achieve the difficult balance between challenging covetousness and encouraging the appreciative reception of God's good gifts.

In keeping with one of the major Reformation emphases, Calvin wonderfully upholds the value and nobility of everyday life in God's eyes. In particular, Calvin champions the high calling of motherhood as well as the importance of marriage, child-rearing and family life (Sermon 41). He even says that the labors of family life ought not to be neglected for the sake of prayer (Sermon 38). Sermon 18 elaborates on these themes and is a good example of a pastoral handling of 1 Timothy 2.

One significant theme in these sermons, which readers might not expect, is the goodness and importance of proper civil government. Sermons 11, 46, and 51 contain significant discussions on a theory of government. Sermon 5 also deals with the necessity of justice and holiness in society. The discussions in Geneva have had a shaping influence on political theory in Western culture.⁸

I hope readers will be as enriched by these sermons as I have been. Relevant insights jump from practically every page. Plus, a significant portion of the great reforming work takes shape before our very eyes. Commenting on a long excerpt from one of these sermons, Parker says, “Such preaching as this pursued so regularly and applied so stringently to the people, was the central explosive point of the church’s work in Geneva.”⁹ May this new edition of those sermons help to spur on such work today.

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⁸ This theme is admirably examined in Douglas Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th through the 18th Centuries* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992).

⁹ Parker, *Portrait*, 89.