

The Divine Majesty of the Word

John Calvin: The Man and His Preaching

1997 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors

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By John Piper February 4, 1997

The Precious Weight of the Glory of God

I would like to begin by focusing our attention on God's self-identification in [Exodus 3:14-15](#). You remember that God called Moses and commissioned him to go to Egypt and bring his people out of bondage. Moses is frightened at this prospect and raises the objection that he is not the person to do this. God responds by saying, "I will be with you" (verse 12). Then Moses says, "[When I] say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" And God's response is one of the most important revelations that has ever been given to man:

And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" And God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD [*JHWH*], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations."

In other words, the great, central, Biblical name of *Yahweh* is explicitly rooted by God himself in the phrase "I am who I am". Tell them, *the one who simply and absolutely is* has sent you. Tell them that the essential thing about me is that I am.

I begin with this Biblical self-identification of God because my unhidden and unashamed aim in this message on John Calvin - and indeed in all the ten years of this conference for pastors - is to fan the flame in you of a passion for the centrality and supremacy of God in your ministry. My heart burns when I hear God say, "My name is, 'I am who I am.'" Doesn't yours? It burns when I think of the absoluteness of God's existence - never beginning, never ending, never becoming, never improving, simply and absolutely there to be dealt with on his terms or not at all.

Let it hit you, brothers: God - the God in whose name this conference gathers - never had a beginning. God never had a beginning! "I AM has sent me to you." And the one who never had a beginning, but always was and is and will be, defines all things. Whether we want him to be there or not, he is there. We do not negotiate what we want for reality. *God* defines reality. When we come into existence, we stand before a God who made us and owns us. We have absolutely no choice in this matter. We do not choose

to be. And when we are, we do not choose that God be. No ranting and raving, no sophisticated doubt or skepticism, has any effect on the existence of God. He simply and absolutely is. "Tell them I AM has sent you."

If we don't like it, we can change, for our joy, or we can resist, to our destruction. But one thing remains absolutely unassailed. God *is*. He was there before we came. He will be there when we are gone. And therefore, what matters in ministry. above all things, is this God. I cannot escape the simple and obvious truth that God must be the main thing in ministry. Ministry has to do with God because life has to do with God, and life has to do with God because all the universe has to do with God, and the universe has to do with God because every atom and every emotion and every soul of every angelic, demonic and human being belongs to God, who absolutely *is*. He created all that is, he sustains everything in being, he directs the course of all events, because "from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be glory [in our ministries!] forever" ([Romans 11:36](#)).

On this tenth anniversary of the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, my desire is as strong as ever that God might inflame in you a passion for his centrality and supremacy in your ministry, so that your people will say, when you are dead and gone, "This man knew God. This man loved God. This man lived for the glory of God. This man showed us God week after week. This man, as the apostle said, was 'filled with all the fullness of God.'"

This is my aim and my burden for the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. Not only because it is *implicit* in the sheer, awesome existence of God, and not only because it is *explicit* in the Word of God, but also because David Wells is staggeringly right when he says, "It is this God, majestic and holy in his being . . . who has disappeared from the modern evangelical world" (see note 1). Leslie Newbigen, from the British angle, says much the same thing: "I suddenly saw," he writes, "that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the center was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that. . . . I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, and not in the glory of God" (see note 2). And, O, have we slipped. How many are the churches today where the dominant experience is the precious weight of the glory of God?

John Calvin saw in his own day the same thing Leslie Newbigen did. In 1538, the Italian Cardinal Sadolet wrote to the leaders of Geneva trying to win them back to the Catholic Church after they had turned to the Reformed teachings. He began his letter with a long conciliatory section on the preciousness of eternal life, before coming to his accusations of the reformation. Calvin wrote the response to Sadolet in six days in the fall of 1539. It was one of his earliest writings and spread his name as a reformer across Europe. Luther read it and said, "Here is a writing which has hands and feet. I rejoice that God raises up such men" (see note 3).

Calvin's response to Sadolet is important because it uncovers the root of Calvin's quarrel with Rome that will determine his whole life - as well as the shape of this lecture. The issue is not, first, justification or

priestly abuses or transubstantiation or prayers to saints or papal authority. All those will come in for discussion. But beneath all of them, the fundamental issue for John Calvin, from the beginning to the end of his life, was the issue of the centrality and supremacy and majesty of the glory of God. He sees in Sadolet's letter the same thing Newbigen sees in self-centered Evangelicalism.

Here's what he said to the Cardinal: "[Your] zeal for heavenly life [is] a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to *sanctify the name of God*." In other words, even precious truth about eternal life can be so skewed as to displace God as the center and goal. And this was Calvin's chief contention with Rome. It comes out in his writings over and over again. He goes on and says to Sadolet that what he should do - and what Calvin aims to do with all his life - is "set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, *zeal to illustrate the glory of God*" (see note 4).

I think this would be a fitting banner over all of John Calvin's life and work - *zeal to illustrate the glory of God*. The essential meaning of John Calvin's life and preaching is that he recovered and embodied a passion for the absolute reality and majesty of God. That is what I want you to see. Benjamin Warfield said of Calvin, "No man ever had a profounder sense of God than he" (see note 5). There's the key to Calvin's life and theology.

Geerhardus Vos, the Princeton New Testament scholar, asked the question in 1891, What is it about Reformed theology that enables that tradition to grasp the fullness of Scripture unlike any other branch of Christendom? He answers, "Because Reformed theology took hold of the Scriptures in their deepest root idea. . . . This root idea which served as the key to unlock the rich treasures of the Scriptures was *the preeminence of God's glory in the consideration of all that has been created*" (see note 6). It's this relentless orientation on the glory of God that gives coherence to John Calvin's life and to the Reformed tradition that followed. Vos said that the "all-embracing slogan of the Reformed faith is this: the work of grace in the sinner as a *mirror for the glory of God*" (see note 7). Mirroring the glory of God is the meaning of John Calvin's life and ministry.

When Calvin did eventually get to the issue of justification in his response to Sadolet, he said, "You . . . touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. . . . Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, *the glory of Christ is extinguished*" (see note 8). So here again you can see what is fundamental. Justification by faith is crucial. But there is a deeper root reason why it is crucial. The glory of Christ is at stake. Wherever the knowledge of justification is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished. This is always the root issue for Calvin. What truth and what behavior will "illustrate the glory of God"?

For Calvin, the need for the Reformation was fundamentally this: Rome had "destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways — by calling upon the saints to intercede, when Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man; by adoring the Blessed Virgin, when Christ alone shall be adored; by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass, when the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross is complete and sufficient" (see note 9),

by elevating tradition to the level of Scripture and even making the word of Christ dependent for its authority on the word of man (see note 10). Calvin asks, in his *Commentary on Colossians*, "How comes it that we are 'carried about with so many strange doctrines' (Hebrews 13:9)?" And he answers, "Because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us" (see note 11). In other words, the great guardian of Biblical orthodoxy throughout the centuries is a passion for the glory and the excellency of God in Christ. Where the center shifts from God, everything begins to shift everywhere. Which does not bode well for doctrinal faithfulness in our own non-God-centered day.

Therefore the unifying root of all of Calvin's labors is his passion to display the glory of God in Christ. When he was 30 years old, he described an imaginary scene of himself at the end of his life, giving an account to God, and said, "The thing [O God] at which I chiefly aimed, and for which I most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice . . . might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ . . . might be fully displayed" (see note 12).

Twenty-four years later, unchanged in his passions and goals, and one month before he actually did give an account to Christ in heaven (he died at age 54), he said in his last will and testament, "I have written nothing out of hatred to anyone, but I have always faithfully propounded what I esteemed to be *for the glory of God*" (see note 13).

So I ask the question now, What happened to John Calvin to make him a man so mastered by the majesty of God? And what kind of ministry did this produce in his life?

Calvin's Early Life and Conversion

Let's bring the story up to the key event of his conversion soon after he was 21 years old. He was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France, when Martin Luther was 25 years old and had just begun to teach the Bible in Wittenberg. We know almost nothing of his early home life. When he was 14, his father sent him to study theology at the University of Paris, which at that time was untouched by the Reformation in Germany and steeped in Medieval theology. But five years later (when Calvin was 19) his father ran afoul of the church and told his son to leave theology and study law, which he did for the next three years at Orleans and Bourges.

During these years Calvin mastered Greek, and was immersed in the thought of Duns Scotus and William Occam and Gabriel Biel, and he completed his law course. His father died in May of 1531, when Calvin was 21. Calvin felt free then to turn from law to his first love, which had become the classics. He published his first book, a *Commentary on Seneca*, in 1532, at the age of 23. But sometime during these years he was coming into contact with the message and the spirit of the Reformation, and by 1533 something dramatic had happened in his life.

In November, 1533, Nicholas Cop, a friend of Calvin, preached at the opening of the winter term at the University of Paris, and was called to account by the Parliament for his Lutheran-like doctrines. He fled the city, and a general persecution broke out against what King Francis I called "the cursed Lutheran sect." Calvin was among those who escaped. The connection with Cop was so close that some suspect

Calvin actually wrote the message that Cop delivered. So, by 1533, Calvin had crossed the line. He was wholly devoted to Christ and to the cause of the Reformation.

What had happened? Calvin recounts, seven years later, how his conversion came about. He describes how he had been struggling to live out the Catholic faith with zeal:

. . .when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountain . . . to its original purity. Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted . . . to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error. . . .

I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, [a very key phrase, in view of what we will see] in what a sty of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen . . . as in duty bound, [I] made it my first business to betake myself to thy way [O God], condemning my past life, not without groans and tears (see note 14).

God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame. . . . Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress" (see note 15).

What was the foundation of Calvin's faith that yielded a life devoted utterly to displaying the glory and majesty of God? I believe the answer is that Calvin suddenly, as he says, saw and tasted in Scripture the majesty of God. And in that moment, both God and the Word of God were so powerfully and unquestionably authenticated to his soul, that he became the loving servant of God and his word the rest of his life.

"The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit"

How this happened is extremely important, and we need to see Calvin himself describe it in the *Institutes*, especially Book I, Chapters VII and VIII. Here he wrestles with how we can come to a saving knowledge of God through the Scriptures. His answer is the famous phrase, "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit." For example, he says, "Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit" (I, viii, 13). So two things came together for Calvin to give him a "saving knowledge of God" - Scripture and the "inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit." Neither alone suffices to save.

But how does this actually work? What does the Spirit do? The answer is not that the Spirit gives us added revelation to what is in Scripture (see note 16) but that he awakens us, as from the dead, to see and taste the divine reality of God in Scripture, which authenticates it as God's own word. He says, " Our Heavenly Father, revealing his majesty [in Scripture], lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy" (I, viii, 13). There is the key for Calvin: the witness of God to Scripture is the immediate,

unassailable, life-giving revelation to the mind of the majesty of God manifest in the Scriptures themselves.

Over and over again in his description of what happens in coming to faith you see his references to the majesty of God revealed in Scripture, and vindicating Scripture. So already in the dynamics of his conversion the central passion of his life is being ignited.

We are almost at the bottom of this experience now. If we go just a bit deeper we will see more clearly why this conversion resulted in such an "invincible constancy" in Calvin's lifelong allegiance to the majesty of God and the truth of God's Word. Here are the words that will take us deeper.

Therefore illumined by [the Spirit's] power, we believe neither by our own [note this!] nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. (I, vii, 5)

This is almost baffling. He says that his conviction concerning the majesty of God in Scripture rests not in any human judgment, not even his own. What does he mean? As I have wrestled with this, the words of the apostle John have shed the most helpful light on what Calvin is trying to explain. Here are the key words from [1 John 5:7-11](#):

And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is the truth. . . . If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God [= the Spirit] is greater; for the witness of God is this, that He has borne witness concerning His Son. . . . The witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.

In other words the "witness of God," that is, the inward witness of the Spirit, is greater than any human witness - including, I think John would say in this context, the witness of our own judgment. And what is that witness of God? It is not merely a word delivered to our judgment for reflection, for then our conviction would rely on that reflection. What is it then? Verse 11 is the key: "The witness is this: that God has given us eternal life." I take that to mean that God witnesses to us of his reality and the reality of his Son and his Word by giving us life from the dead so that we come alive to his majesty and see him for who he is in his Word. In that instant we do not reason from premises to conclusions, we see that we are awake, and there is not even a prior human judgment about it to lean on. When Lazarus wakened in the tomb by the call or the "witness" of Christ, he knew without reasoning that he was alive and that this call waked him.

Here's the way J. I. Packer puts it:

The internal witness of the Spirit in John Calvin is a work of enlightenment whereby, through the medium of verbal testimony, the blind eyes of the spirit are opened, and divine realities come to be recognized and embraced for what they are. This recognition Calvin says, is as immediate and unanalysable as the perceiving of a color, or a taste, by physical sense - an event about which no more can be said than that

when appropriate stimuli were present it happened, and when it happened we know it had happened (see note 17).

So in his early twenties John Calvin experienced the miracle of having the blind eyes of his spirit opened by the Spirit of God. And what he saw immediately, and without any intervening chain of human reasoning, were two things, so interwoven that they would determine the rest of his life: the majesty of God and the Word of God. The Word mediated the majesty and the majesty vindicated the Word. Henceforth he would be a man utterly devoted to displaying the majesty of God by the exposition of the Word of God.

The Institutes, then Geneva

What form would that ministry take? Calvin knew what he wanted. He wanted the enjoyment of literary ease to promote the Reformed faith as a literary scholar (see note 18). That is what he thought he was cut out for by nature. But God had radically different plans - as he has had for many of us.

After escaping from Paris and finally leaving France entirely, he spent his exile in Basel, Switzerland, between 1534 and 1536. To redeem the time "he devoted himself to the study of Hebrew" (see note 19). In March of 1536, he published there the first edition of the *Institutes*, which would go through five enlargements until its present form in 1559. And we should not think that this was a merely academic exercise. Years later he tells us what was driving him:

But lo! while I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France. . . . It appeared to me, that unless I opposed [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. . . . It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed.

So when you hold the *Institutes* of John Calvin in your hand, remember that theology, for John Calvin, was forged in the furnace of burning flesh, and that Calvin could not sit idly by without some effort to vindicate the faithful and the God for whom they suffered. I think we would, perhaps, do our theology better today if more were at stake in what we said.

In 1536, France gave a temporary amnesty to those who had fled. Calvin returned, put his things in order and left, never to return, taking his brother Antoine and sister Marie with him. He intended to go to Strasbourg and continue his life of peaceful literary production. But he wrote later to a friend, "I have learned from experience that we cannot see very far before us. When I promised myself an easy, tranquil life, what I least expected was at hand" (see note 20). A war between Charles V and Francis I resulted in troop movements that blocked the road to Strasbourg, and Calvin had to detour through Geneva. In retrospect one has to marvel at the providence of God that he should so arrange armies to position his pastors where he would.

The night that he stayed in Geneva, William Farel, the fiery leader of the Reformation in that city, found out he was there and sought him out. It was a meeting that changed the course of history, not just for Geneva, but for the world. Calvin tells us what happened in his preface to his commentary on Psalms:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquillity of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken (see note 21).

The course of his life was irrevocably changed. Not just geographically, but vocationally. Never again would Calvin work in what he called the "tranquility of studies." From now on, every page of the forty-eight volumes of books and tracts and sermons and commentaries and letters that he wrote would be hammered out on the anvil of pastoral responsibility.

He took up his responsibilities in Geneva first as Professor of Sacred Scripture, and within four months was appointed Pastor of St. Peter's church - one of the three parishes in the 10,000-person town of Geneva.

The City Council was not altogether happy with Farel or Calvin because they did not bow to all their wishes. So the two of them were banished in April of 1538.

Calvin breathed a sigh of relief and thought God was relieving him from the crush of pastoral duties so he could be about his studies. But when Martin Bucer found out about Calvin's availability, he did the same thing to get him to Strasbourg that Farel had done to get him to Geneva. Calvin wrote, "that most excellent servant of Christ, Martin Bucer, employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse, before, drew me back to a new station. Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching" (see note 22). That is, he agreed to go to Strasbourg and teach. In fact, for three years Calvin served as the pastor to about 500 French refugees in Strasbourg, as well as teaching New Testament. He also wrote his first commentary, on Romans, and put out the second enlarged edition of the *Institutes*.

Perhaps the most important providence during this three-year stay in Strasbourg was finding a wife. Several had tried to get Calvin a wife. He was 31 years old and numerous women had shown interest. Calvin had told his friend and matchmaker William Farel what he wanted in a wife: "The only beauty which allures me is this - that she be chaste, not too nice or fastidious, economical, patient, likely to take care of my health" (see note 23). Parker comments, "Romantic love . . . seems to have had no place in his character. Yet prosaic wooing led to a happy marriage" (see note 24). I think Parker was wrong about romantic love (see below on Idelette's death). But the prosaic wooing he referred to was toward an Anabaptist widow named Idelette Stordeur who had joined Calvin's congregation with her husband Jean.

In the spring of 1540, Jean died of plague and that August 6, 1540, Calvin and Idelette were married. She brought a son and daughter with her into Calvin's home.

Meanwhile back in Geneva, chaos was making the city fathers think that maybe Calvin and Farel were not so bad after all. May 1, 1541, the City Council rescinded the ban on Calvin and even held him up as a man of God. This was an agonizing decision for Calvin, because he knew that life in Geneva would be full of controversy and danger. Earlier in October he said to Farel that though he preferred not to go, "yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord" (see note 25). This became Calvin's motto and the picture on his emblem included a hand holding out a heart to God with the inscription, *prompte et sincere* ("promptly and sincerely").

Tuesday, September 13, 1541, he entered Geneva for the second time to serve the church there until his death on May 27, 1564. His first son, Jacques, was born July 28, 1542, and two weeks later died. He wrote to his friend Viret, "The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son. But He is Himself a Father and knows best what is good for his children" (see note 26). This is the kind of submission to the sovereign hand of God Calvin rendered in all of his countless trials.

Idelette was never well again. They had two more children who also died at or soon after birth. Then on March 29, 1549, Idelette died of what was probably tuberculosis. Calvin wrote to Viret,

You know well how tender, or rather soft, my mind is. Had not a powerful self-control been given to me, I could not have borne up so long. And truly, mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordained, would have willingly shared not only my poverty but even my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. She was never troublesome to me throughout the whole course of her illness, but was more anxious about her children than about herself. As I feared these private worries might upset her to no purpose, I took occasion three days before she died, to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty towards her children" (see note 27).

Calvin never remarried. And it is just as well. The pace he kept would not have left much time for wife or children. His acquaintance, Colladon, who lived in Geneva during these years describes his life:

Calvin for his part did not spare himself at all, working far beyond what his power and regard for his health could stand. He preached commonly every day for one week in two [and twice on every Sunday, or a total of about 10 times every fortnight]. Every week he lectured three times in theology. . . . He was at the *Consistoire* on the appointed day and made all the remonstrances. . . . Every Friday at the Bible Study . . . what he added after the leader had made his *declaration* was almost a lecture. He never failed in visiting the sick, in private warning and counsel, and the rest of the numberless matters arising out of the ordinary exercise of his ministry. But besides these ordinary tasks, he had great care for believers in France, both in teaching them and exhorting and counseling them and consoling them by letters when they were being persecuted, and also in interceding for them. . . . Yet all that did not prevent him from going on working at his special study and composing many splendid and very useful books" (see note 28).

His Invincible Constancy in the Ministry

He was, as Wolfgang Musculus called him, "a bow always strung." In one way he seemed to take heed to his health. Colladon says that "he was for many years with a single meal a day and never [took] anything between two meals . . ." His reasons were that the weakness of his stomach and his migraines could only be controlled, he had found by experiment, by continual abstinence (see note 29). But on the other hand, he was apparently careless of his health and worked night and day with scarcely a break. You can hear the drivenness in this letter to Falais in 1546: "Apart from the sermons and the lectures, there is a month gone by in which I have scarce done anything, in such wise I am almost ashamed to live thus useless" (see note 30). A mere 20 sermons and 12 lectures in that month!

To get a clearer picture of his iron constancy, add to this work schedule the "continuous ill health" (see note 31) he endured. He wrote to his physicians in 1564 when he was 53 years old, and described his colic and spitting of blood and ague and gout and the "excruciating sufferings" of his hemorrhoids (see note 32). But worst of all seemed to be the kidney stones that had to pass unrelieved by any sedative.

[They] gave me exquisite pain. ... At length not without the most painful strainings I ejected a calculus which in some degree mitigated my sufferings, but such was its size that it lacerated the urinary canal and a copious discharge of blood followed. This hemorrhage could only be arrested by an injection of milk through a syringe (see note 33).

On top of all this pressure and physical suffering were the threats to his own life. "He was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets" (see note 34). On his deathbed Calvin said to the pastors gathered, "I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun]" (see note 35). In a letter to Melanchthon in 1558, he wrote that war was imminent in the region and that enemy troops could reach Geneva within half an hour. "Whence you may conclude," he said, "that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity" (see note 36).

One of the most persistent thorns in Calvin's side were the Libertines in Geneva. But, here too, his perseverance was triumphant in a remarkable way. In every city in Europe men kept mistresses. When Calvin began his ministry in Geneva in 1536 at the age of 27, there was a law that said a man could keep only one mistress (see note 37). Even after Calvin had been preaching as pastor in St. Peter's church for over fifteen years, the immorality was a plague, even in the church. The Libertines boasted in their license. For them the "communion of saints" meant the common possession of goods, houses, *bodies and wives*. So they practiced adultery and indulged in sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. And at the same time they claimed the right to sit at the Lord's table (see note 38).

The crisis of the communion came to a head in 1553. A well-to-do Libertine named Berthelier was forbidden by the Consistory of the church to eat the Lord's Supper, but appealed the decision to the

Council of the City, which overturned the ruling. This created a crisis for Calvin who would not think of yielding to the state the rights of excommunication, nor of admitting a Libertine to the Lord's table.

The issue, as always, was the glory of Christ. He wrote to Viret, "I . . . took an oath that I had resolved rather to meet death than profane so shamefully the Holy Supper of the Lord. . . . My ministry is abandoned if I suffer the authority of the Consistory to be trampled upon, and extend the Supper of Christ to open scoffers. . . . I should rather die a hundred times than subject Christ to such foul mockery" (see note 39).

The Lord's day of testing arrived. The Libertines were present to eat the Lord's supper. It was a critical moment for the Reformed faith in Geneva.

The sermon had been preached, the prayers had been offered, and Calvin descended from the pulpit to take his place beside the elements at the communion table. The bread and wine were duly consecrated by him, and he was now ready to distribute them to the communicants. Then on a sudden a rush was begun by the troublers in Israel in the direction of the communion table. . . . Calvin flung his arms around the sacramental vessels as if to protect them from sacrilege, while his voice rang through the building:

"These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned, and dishonor the table of my God." "After this," says, Beza, Calvin's first biographer, "the sacred ordinance was celebrated with a profound silence, and under solemn awe in all present, as if the Deity Himself had been visible among them" (see note 40).

The point of mentioning all these woes in Geneva is to set in bold relief the invincible constancy of John Calvin in the ministry that God had called him to. We asked earlier, What happened to John Calvin to make him a man so mastered by the majesty of God? And what kind of ministry did this produce in his life? We answered the first part of that question by saying, Calvin experienced the supernatural inward witness of the Spirit to the Majesty of God in Scripture. Henceforth, everything in his thinking and writing and ministry was aimed at illustrating the majesty and glory of God.

Now what is the answer to the second part of that question: what kind of ministry did it produce? Part of the answer has been given: it produced a ministry of incredible steadfastness - what I have called, using Calvin's own words, "invincible constancy" (see note 41). But that is only half the answer. It was a ministry of unrelenting exposition of the Word of God. The constancy had a focus, the exposition of the word of God.

Calvin had seen the majesty of God in the Scriptures. This persuaded him that the Scriptures were the very word of God. He said, "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone, and has nothing of man mixed with it" (see note 42). His own experience had taught him that "the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it" (see note 43). These truths led to an inevitable conclusion for Calvin. Since the Scriptures are the very voice of God and since they are therefore self-authenticating in revealing the

majesty of God, and since the majesty and glory of God are the reason for all existence, it follows that Calvin's life would be marked by invincible constancy in the exposition of Scripture.

All was Exposition of the Scriptures

He wrote tracts, he wrote the great *Institutes*, he wrote commentaries (on all the New Testament books except Revelation, plus the Pentateuch, Psalms, Isaiah and Joshua), he gave Biblical lectures (many of which were published as virtual commentaries) and he preached ten sermons every two weeks. But *all* of it was exposition of Scripture. Dillenberger said, "[Calvin] assumed that his whole theological labor was the exposition of Scripture" (see note 44). In his last will and testament he said, "I have endeavored, both in my sermons and also in my writings and commentaries, to preach the word purely and chastely, and faithfully to interpret His sacred Scriptures" (see note 45).

Everything was exposition of Scripture. This was the ministry unleashed by seeing the majesty of God in Scripture. The Scripture were absolutely central because they were absolutely the Word of God and had as their self-authenticating theme the majesty and glory of God. But out of all these labors of exposition, preaching was supreme. Emile Doumergue, the foremost biographer of John Calvin with his six-volume life of Calvin, said, as he stood in the pulpit of John Calvin on the 400th anniversary of Calvin's birth, "That is the Calvin who seems to me to be the real and authentic Calvin, the one who explains all the others: Calvin the preacher of Geneva, molding by his words the spirit of the Reformed of the sixteenth century" (see note 46).

Calvin's preaching was of one kind from beginning to end: he preached steadily through book after book of the Bible. He never wavered from this approach to preaching for almost twenty-five years of ministry in St. Peter's church of Geneva - with the exception of a few high festivals and special occasions. "On Sunday he took always the New Testament, except for a few Psalms on Sunday afternoons. During the week . . . it was always the Old Testament" (see note 47). The records show fewer than half a dozen exceptions for the sake of the Christian year. He almost entirely ignored Christmas and Easter in the selection of his text (see note 48).

To give you some idea of the scope of the Calvin's pulpit, he began his series on the book of Acts on August 25, 1549, and ended it in March of 1554. After Acts he went on to the epistles to the Thessalonians (46 sermons), Corinthians (186 sermons), pastorals (86 sermons), Galatians (43 sermons), Ephesians (48 sermons) - till May 1558. Then there is a gap when he is ill. In the spring of 1559 he began the Harmony of the Gospels and was not finished when he died in May, 1564. During the week of that season he preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, 123 on Genesis and so on (see note 49).

One of the clearest illustrations that this was a self-conscious choice on Calvin's part was the fact that on Easter Day, 1538, after preaching, he left the pulpit of St. Peter's, banished by the City Council. He returned in September, 1541 - over three years later - and picked up the exposition in the next verse (see note 50).

Why this remarkable commitment to the centrality of sequential expository preaching? I will mention three reasons. They are just as valid today as they were in the sixteenth century.

First, Calvin believed that the Word of God was a lamp that had been taken away from the churches. He said in his own personal testimony, "Thy word, which ought to have shone on all thy people like a lamp, was taken away, or at least suppressed as to us. . . . And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but . . . earnestly to supplicate thee not to judge according to [my] deserts that fearful abandonment of thy word from which, in thy wondrous goodness thou hast at last delivered me" (see note 51). Calvin reckoned that the continuous exposition of books of the Bible was the best way to overcome the "fearful abandonment of [God's] Word."

Second, Parker says that Calvin had a horror of those who preached their own ideas in the pulpit. He said, "When we enter the pulpit, it is not so that we may bring our own dreams and fancies with us" (see note 52). He believed that by expounding Scripture as a whole, he would be forced to deal with all that *God* wanted to say, not just what *he* might want to say.

Third - and this brings us full circle to the beginning, where Calvin saw the majesty of God in his word - he believed with all his heart that the Word of God was indeed the Word of *God*, and that all of it was inspired and profitable and radiant with the light of the glory of God. In Sermon number 61 on Deuteronomy he challenged us:

Let the pastors boldly dare all things *by the word of God*. . . . Let them constrain all the power, glory, and excellence of the world to give place to and to obey *the divine majesty of this word*. Let them enjoin everyone by it, from the highest to the lowest. Let them edify the body of Christ. Let them devastate Satan's reign. Let them pasture the sheep, kill the wolves, instruct and exhort the rebellious. Let them bind and loose thunder and lightning, if necessary, *but let them do all according to the word of God* (see note 53).

The key phrase here is "the divine majesty of this word." This was always the root issue for Calvin. How might he best show forth for all of Geneva and all of Europe and all of history the divine majesty? He answered with a life of continuous expository preaching. There would be no better way to manifest the full range of the glories of God and the majesty of his being than to spread out the full range of God's Word in the context of the pastoral ministry of shepherding care.

My own conviction is that this is why preaching remains a central event in the life of the church even 500 years after the printing press and the arrival of radio and TV and cassettes and CD's and computers. God's word is mainly about the majesty of God and the glory of God. That is the main issue in ministry. And, even though the glory and majesty of God in his word can be known in the still small voice of whispered counsel by the bedside of a dying saint, there is something in it that cries out for expository exultation. This is why preaching will never die. And radical, pervasive God-centeredness will always create a hunger for preaching in God's people. If God is "I am who I am" - the great, absolute, sovereign, mysterious, all-glorious God of majesty whom Calvin saw in Scripture, there will always be preaching,

because the more this God is known and the more this God is central, the more we will feel that he must not just be analyzed and explained, he must be acclaimed and heralded and magnified with expository exultation.

* * *

Appendix

Calvin's Barbaric World - The Case of Michael Servetus

The Europe that John Calvin was born into on July 10, 1509, was a harsh and immoral and even barbaric place to live. There was no sewer system or piped water supply or central heating or refrigeration or antibiotics or penicillin or aspirin or surgery for appendicitis or novocaine for tooth extraction or electric lights (for studying at night) or water heaters or washers or dryers or stoves or ballpoint pens or typewriters or computers or motors of any kind. Life was harsh.

Calvin, like many others in his day, suffered from "almost continuous ill-health" (see note 54). He wrote to his physicians in 1564 when he was 53 years old, and described his colic and spitting of blood and ague and hemorrhoids. He said, "An ulcer in the hemorrhoid veins long caused me excruciating sufferings" (see note 55). But even worse were the kidney stones that he had to pass, unrelieved by any sedative.

[They] gave me exquisite pain. . . . At length not without the most painful strainings I ejected a calculus which in some degree mitigated my sufferings, but such was its size that it lacerated the urinary canal and a copious discharge of blood followed. This hemorrhage could only be arrested by an injection of milk through a syringe. My sedentary way of life to which I am condemned by the gout in my feet precludes all hopes of a cure. I am also prevented from taking exercise on horseback by my hemorrhoids (see note 56).

If life could be miserable physically, it could get even worse socially. "He was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets" (see note 57). On his deathbed Calvin said to the pastors gathered on April 28, 1564, "I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun]" (see note 58).

Not only was life harsh, it was immoral. In every city in Europe, men kept mistresses. When Calvin began his ministry in Geneva in 1536 at the age of 27 there was a law that said a man could keep only one mistress (see note 59). Even after Calvin had been preaching as pastor in St. Peter's church for over fifteen years the immorality was a plague, even in the church, especially in the form of the so-called Libertines. They were a sixteenth century version of the same group at Corinth who boasted in their license. By the "communion of saints," they understood the common possession of goods, houses, *bodies and wives*. So they practiced adultery and indulged in sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. And at the same time they claimed the right to sit at the Lord's table (see note 60).

Not only were the times harsh and immoral, they were often barbaric. This is important to see, because Calvin did not escape the influence of his times. He described in a letter the cruelty common in Geneva. "A conspiracy of men and women has lately been discovered who, for the space of three years, had [intentionally] spread the plague through the city, by what mischievous device I know not." The upshot of this was that fifteen women were burned at the stake. "Some men," he said, "have even been punished more severely; some have committed suicide in prison, and while twenty-five are still kept prisoners, the conspirators do not cease . . . to smear the door-locks of the dwelling-houses with their poisonous ointment" (see note 61).

This sort of punishment loomed on the horizon not just for criminals, but for all the reformers. Calvin was driven out of his homeland, France, under threat of death. For the next 20 years he agonized over the martyrs there and corresponded with many of them. In 1552, five young pastors, who had been trained in Switzerland, returned as missionaries to France and were arrested. Calvin writes to them through their trial. They were condemned to death by burning. "We pray," he wrote, "that [God] would glorify Himself more and more by your constancy, and that He may, by the comfort of His Spirit, sweeten and endear all that is bitter to the flesh, and so absorb your spirits in Himself, that in contemplating that heavenly crown, you may be ready without regret to leave all that belongs to this world" (see note 62).

In a letter to Melanchthon on November 19, 1558, he wrote that war was imminent in the region and that enemy troops could reach Geneva within half-an-hour. "Whence you may conclude," he said, "that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity" (see note 63). So Calvin lived in a time of incredible cruelty and almost daily vulnerability to death by agonizing disease or agonizing torture - and that without any hope of pain-relievers. It was a harsh and immoral and barbaric time.

This atmosphere gave rise to the greatest and the worst achievement of Calvin. The greatest was the writing of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and the worst was his joining in the condemnation of the heretic, Michael Servetus, to burning at the stake in Geneva.

The *Institutes* was first published in March, 1536, when Calvin was 26 years old. It went through five editions and enlargements until it reached its present form in the 1559 edition. If this is all Calvin had written - and not 48 volumes of other works - it would have established him as the foremost theologian of the Reformation. But it did not arise for merely academic reasons. Here's why he wrote it, soon after he had been driven from France and was safely hiding in Basel:

But lo! whilst I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France It appeared to me, that unless I opposed them [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. . . . It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed (see note 64).

So it was the very barbarity of the times against the faithful in France that stirred up Calvin to write the first edition of the Institutes.

But it was this same barbarity from which he could not disentangle himself. Michael Servetus was a Spaniard, a medical doctor, a lawyer and a theologian. His doctrine of the Trinity was unorthodox - so much so as to shock both Catholic and Protestant in his day. In 1553 he published his views and was arrested by the Catholics in France. But, alas, he escaped to Geneva. He was arrested there and Calvin argued the case against him. He was sentenced to death. Calvin called for a swift execution, but he was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553 (see note 65).

This has tarnished Calvin's name so severely that many cannot give his teaching a hearing. But it is not clear that most of us, given that milieu, would not have gone along under the circumstances (see note 66). Melancthon was the gentle, soft-spoken associate of Martin Luther whom Calvin had met and loved. He wrote to Calvin on the Servetus affair, "I am wholly of your opinion and declare also that your magistrates acted quite justly in condemning the blasphemer to death" (see note 67). Calvin never held civil office in Geneva (see note 68) but exerted all his influence as a pastor. Yet, in this execution, his hands are as stained with Servetus' blood as David's were with Uriah's.

Which makes the confessions of Calvin near the end of his life all the more important. On April 25, 1564, a month before his death, he called the magistrates of the city to his room and spoke these words,

With my whole soul I embrace the mercy which [God] has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning for my sins with the merits of his death and passion, that in this way he might satisfy for *all my crimes and faults*, and blot them from his remembrance. . . . I confess I have failed innumerable times to execute my office properly, and had not He, of His boundless goodness, assisted me, all that zeal had been fleeting and vain. . . . For all these reasons, I testify and declare that I trust to no other security for my salvation than this, and this only, viz., that as God is the Father of mercy, he will show himself such a Father to me, who acknowledge myself to be *a miserable sinner* (see note 69).

T. H. L. Parker said, "he should never have fought the battle of faith with the world's weapons" (see note 70). Whether Calvin came to that conclusion before he died, we don't know. But what we know is that Calvin knew himself a "miserable sinner" whose only hope in view of "all [his] crimes" was the mercy of God and the blood of Jesus.

So the times were harsh and immoral and barbaric, and had a contaminating effect on everyone, just as we are all contaminated today by the evils of our time. Their blind spots and evils may be different from ours. And it may be that the very things they saw clearly are the things we are blind to. It would be foolhardy to say that we would have never done what they did under their circumstances, and thus draw the conclusion that they have nothing to teach us. In fact, what we probably need to say is that some of our evils are such that we are blind to them, just as they were blind to many of theirs, and the virtues they manifested in those times are the very ones that we probably need in ours. There was in the life and

ministry of John Calvin a grand God-centeredness, Bible-allegiance and iron constancy. Under the banner of God's mercy to miserable sinners we would do well to listen and learn.

Notes:

1. David Wells. *No Place for Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, Pub. Co., 1993), p. 300.
2. Quoted in Tim Stafford, "God's Missionary to Us," *Christianity Today*, Dec. 9, 1996. Vol. 40, No. 4, p. 29.
3. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1909), p. 68.
4. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*, (Scholars Press, 1975), p. 89 (emphasis added).
5. Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), p. 24.
6. Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 241-242 (emphasis added).
7. Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," p. 248.
8. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*, p. 95.
9. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 109.
10. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, vii, 1. "A most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men!"
11. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 55.
12. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*, p. 110.
13. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, p. 42.
14. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, pp. 114-115.
15. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, p. 26.
16. J. I. Packer, "Calvin the Theologian," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p. 166. "Rejecting both the Roman contention that the Scripture is to be received as authoritative on the church's authority, and with it the idea that Scripture could be proved divinely authoritative by rational argument alone, Calvin affirms Scripture to be self-authenticating through the inner witness of the Holy spirit. What is this 'inner witness'? Not a special quality of experience, nor a new, private revelation, nor an existential 'decision', but a work of enlightenment."
17. J. I. Packer, "Calvin the Theologian," p. 166.
18. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, p. 86.
19. Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, (Milwaukee, Oregon: Back Home Industries, 1996, from 1844 Edinburgh edition of the Calvin Translation Society), p. 21.
20. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 24.
21. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, p. 28.

22. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, p. 29.
23. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 70.
24. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 69.
25. W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, translated by Lyle D. Bierma, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 38.
26. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 71.
27. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 71.
28. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 62-63.
29. T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin, A Biography*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 104.
30. T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin, A Biography*, pp. 103-104.
31. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, orig. English 1577, orig. French, 1562), with introduction by the publishers, viii.
32. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, (Scholars Press, 1975), p. 78.
33. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 78.
34. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 29.
35. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 42.
36. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 71.
37. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 29.
38. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1909), p. 75.
39. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, p. 77.
40. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, pp. 78-79.
41. In a sermon on [Job 33:1-7](#), Calvin calls preachers to constancy: "When men so forget themselves that they cannot subject themselves to Him Who has created and fashioned them, it behooves us to have an *invincible constancy*, and to reckon that we shall have enmity and displeasure when we do our duty; yet nevertheless let us go through it without bending." John Calvin, *Sermons from Job by John Calvin*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 245.
42. Quoted in J. I. Packer, "Calvin the Theologian," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p. 162.
43. *Institutes*, I. vii, 4.
44. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 14.
45. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 35f.
46. Quoted by Harold Dekker, "Introduction," *Sermons from Job by John Calvin*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. xii.
47. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 82.
48. John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, trans. By Leroy Nixon, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), p. 8.
49. For these statistics see T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 83, and W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, pp. 111-112.

50. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 60.
51. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 115.
52. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 83.
53. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. xii (emphasis added).
54. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, orig. English 1577, orig. French, 1562), with introduction by the publishers, viii.
55. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, (Scholars Press, 1975), p. 78.
56. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 78.
57. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 29.
58. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 42.
59. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 29.
60. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1909), p. 75.
61. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, p. 63.
62. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 120.
63. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 71.
64. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 27.
65. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 102.
66. T. H. L. Parker describes some of those circumstances in *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 102.
67. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letter*, p. 196.
68. Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), p. 16.
69. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 35 (emphasis added).
70. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 103.

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