

CALVIN THE PASTOR

The title of this presentation may seem novel.

We know Calvin the theologian, famous for his “Institutes”;

Calvin the exegete, who wrote his insightful commentaries;

Calvin the reformer, the man who consolidated and strengthened the Reformation;

Calvin the preacher, ministering the word in Geneva for many years;

but we don’t usually think of him as a pastor.

To some the title, “Calvin the Pastor” may even seem a contradiction in terms. He is often pictured as a harsh and unbending man, one who burnt heretics at the stake, who ruled Geneva with an iron fist, who was cold and intellectual, severe and stern, rigid and inflexible; hardly the impression one has of a pastor.

Yet, Calvin was a full time minister, with responsibilities for preaching and pastoral work in the St Pierre congregation, one of the three city churches in Geneva (the other two being St Gervais and La Madeleine). He was not a remote administrator, organizing and supervising church life according to a rigid pattern, but was a pastor, intimately involved in the lives of the members of his congregation.

He believed a minister must be:

A converted man

A called man

A gifted man

A preacher

A pastor

A CONVERTED MAN

Calvin spoke and wrote very little about his conversion, or indeed any aspect of his personal life. His reticence was deliberate because he wanted all the attention to go to the Lord Jesus, not to himself. (William J. Bouwsma, John Calvin, A sixteenth Century Portrait, p. 5). What we know of his conversion comes from passage in the preface to his commentary on the psalms, written in 1557, nearly thirty years after the event. There he compared his calling to that of David; “as he was taken from the sheepfold, and elevated to the rank of supreme authority; so God having taken me from my

originally obscure and humble condition has reckoned me worthy of being invested with the honourable office of a preacher and minister of the gospel.” He went on to describe how he was studying law “in obedience to the will on my father; but God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a different direction to my course. And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, 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 so intense a desire to make progress therein...” (Calvin, Commentary on the Psalms, Vol 4, p. xl)

In his commentaries he wrote; “No one is a fit teacher in the Church, who has not been the disciple of the Son of God, and rightly instructed in his school, since his authority alone ought to prevail.” (Gen. Epp. 158)

We today, of course, concur with this, that a minister must be a converted man and a disciple of Christ.

A CALLED MAN

By disposition and inclination he was a scholar. BB Warfield’s assessment is that “He was by nature, by gifts, by training – by inborn predilection and by acquired capacities alike – a ‘man of letters’.” (Warfield, p. 5) This is evident in both the astonishing quantity and the quality of his written work. “The Works of John Calvin” run to 59 quarto volumes (critical edition of Baum, Cunitz, and Reuss). “They are written in the best Latin of their day, elevated, crisp, energetic, eloquent with the eloquence of an earnest and sober spirit...” (Warfield, p. 7)

Calvin wanted to live the quiet and reclusive life of a scholar and teacher. But God had other plans and he heard a strong call to serve as a minister of the gospel. It was a choice made reluctantly and out of a strong sense of duty. When Farel exhorted him to remain in Geneva and help with the work there he said; “I felt as if God had laid his mighty hand upon me.” He said that returning to Geneva was for him “going ‘straight to the cross’; he went... ‘as a sacrifice slain unto God – ‘bound and fettered to obedience to God.’” (Warfield, p. 6). He wrote to Farel on October 24, 1540; “If I had any choice I would rather do anything than give in to you in this matter, but since I remember that I no longer belong to myself, I offer my heart to God as a sacrifice.” (J Cadier, p. 105) These words became his motto. He pictured them by a hand holding a heart and the Latin words, *Prompte et Sincere*. He did his work in Geneva faithfully and diligently, pursuing the work he believed the

Lord had called him to, in the place the Lord had assigned him. His service there was not prompted by ambition or power or control, as some have accused, but rather by obedience to God's call and command.

His sense of call sustained him through many trials and sufferings. Most of us who are pastors would say the same thing – it is a strong sense of call to the ministry that keeps us persevering in times of trial, opposition and difficulty.

He described “this secret call” as “the honest testimony of our heart, that we accept the office offered to us, not from ambition or avarice, or any other unlawful motive, but from a sincere fear of God, and an ardent zeal for the edification of the Church.” (Institutes, IV.iii.11) Those are the motives that ought to drive all pastors.

When he returned to Geneva after his exile he asked for a committee of pastors and laymen to prepare a constitution for the church. This became the “Ordinances of the Church in Geneva” and they describe the Four Ministries of the church: pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. The work of the pastor is “to proclaim the word of God for the purpose of instructing, admonishing, exhorting, and reproving, both in public and in private, to administer the sacraments and, to exercise fraternal discipline together with the elders or delegates.” (Philip Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin.* , p. 80). To fulfill that last purpose the pastors from the town and country met together once every week for Bible study and mutual admonition.

Calvin had a high view of the ministry. “This human ministry which God uses to govern the church is the chief sinew by which believers are held together in one body.” (Institutes, IV iii. 2) “God often commended the dignity of the ministry by all possible marks of approval in order that it might be held among us in highest honour and esteem, even as the most excellent of all things.” (Institutes, IV, iii, 3) He expressed this negatively when he wrote; “Nothing is more ruinous to the Church than for God to take away faithful pastors” (Jer I:181)

A Roman Catholic historian wrote; “It may be confidently asserted that in no religious society of Christian Europe the clergy was assigned a position so dignified, prominent, and influential as in the Church which Calvin built up in Geneva.” (Quoted by Phillip Schaff, Vol 8, p. 227)

Those of us called to be pastors need a strong sense of call to the ministry as well as genuine and pure motives. And the entire church, pastors and members, need to keep a high view of this calling and the crucial role pastors occupy in each local congregation of Jesus Christ.

A PREACHER

He saw the primary calling of the pastor as proclaiming the Word of God. For him this was the center of his pastoral work; everything revolved around the pulpit. He wrote;

“...according to the command of Christ, we are not properly united or perfected but by the outward preaching, when we suffer ourselves to be ruled and taught by men. This is a universal rule, which covers both the highest and the lowest.” (Calvin, Commentary on Ephesians 4:12)

“We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church. We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors.” (Institutes IV, i. 5)

He preached to the congregation of St Pierre, usually twice every Sunday and once every day of alternate weeks. (This practice varied at different times of his ministry, and was dependant on the state of his health). Following this schedule he preached 4000 sermons after his return to Geneva; more than 170 sermons a year.

On Sundays he always preached from the New Testament and during the week from the Old. His practice was to preach steadily through books of the Bible, beginning at chapter 1, verse 1, and expounding it verse by verse until he came to the end. (Parker, Portrait, p. 82). His return to Geneva (13 September 1541) provides us with a striking example of his commitment to continuous expository preaching. In a letter he explains; “When I came before the people to preach, everyone was eaten up with curiosity. But, remaining completely silent about the events which surely they all expected me to mention, I set forth very briefly the principles of my ministry, and then quickly and directly I recalled to mind the faith and integrity of those who supported me. After this introduction I began to comment on the text at the place where I had stopped. By doing this I wanted to show that rather than having given up the teaching office, I had only been interrupted for awhile.” (Richard Stauffer, *The Humanness of John Calvin*, Abingdon Press, New Yourk, 1971.

Much has been written about Calvin as a preacher. I only touch on this briefly to show that he regarded this as his central duty as a minister of the Word.

A PASTOR

When people today think of a modern pastor the person who comes to mind is the “celebrity pastor” who heads up a large megachurch. On Sundays he is fluent, magnetic, and entertaining. During the week he is a CEO with managerial expertise. All too often the modern pastor is pragmatic, focused on results, and concerned about his image.

The older model of the pastor was “the scholar-saint, one who was as comfortable with books and learning as with the aches of the soul. This was the shepherd who knew his flock, knew how to tend it, and Sunday by Sunday took that flock into the treasures of God’s Word.” (David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant*, p. 40) We have already seen how he taught his people the Scriptures, but he was also a pastor. He regarded pastors as “those to whom is committed the charge of a particular flock” (Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians 4:11*) and he was involved in the lives of his congregation at St Pierre, busy with the usual run of pastoral duties. In the 10 years between 1550 and 1559 he took 270 weddings and 50 baptisms. He also, along with the other pastors, visited the sick, and was willing to visit them even in the height of the plague that came to Geneva in 1542. (Parker, *Portrait*, p. 81)

It was his practice not to visit unless a person requested him to do so and taught his people to call for him if they needed to see him. He based this on James 5:14; “Let him send for the elder’s of the church.” Jay Adams supports this principle, although he admits, “Calvin possibly went too far.” [footnote: Adams argues that it is the duty of the sick member to call for the pastor; that the pastor is not omniscient, and so needs to be informed about sickness; and if a member calls the pastor he is then ready to see him and discuss his spiritual state. (J Adams, *Shepherding God’s Flock 1, The Pastoral Life*, p. 114f)]

Applying the truth of James 5:16 he urged members of the church to **confess their sins** to one another, especially to their pastor. “...they are better fitted than the others because the Lord has appointed them by the very calling of the ministry to instruct us by word of mouth to overcome and correct our sins, and also to give us consolation through assurance of pardon.” (*Institutes*, III, iv, 12)

Under his leadership Geneva showed great **hospitality to strangers**. In 1543 the city numbered about 13,000. In the next seven years it grew by 1000 people a year, most of whom were protestants fleeing persecution in their own countries – France, Italy, England, Spain, and Holland. Calvin

treated them with great hospitality and secured the rights of citizenship for them. He often provided lodgings for strangers passing through the city.

His passion was writing and preaching but he knew that the work of the ministry required more than these areas of interest. He wrote; “Whatever others may hold we cannot think so narrowly of our office that when preaching is done our task is fulfilled, and we may take our rest.” (Warfield, p. 16) If the church was to be reformed on the New Testament pattern the gospel not only had to be preached, but also applied. This required **church discipline**, which he believed was an important part of the work of the elders and pastors. [footnote: He took his pastoral responsibilities very seriously as is evident in the administration of the Lord’ Supper. He was deeply concerned about his ignorance about the spiritual condition of those who took part in the Lord’s Supper and the possibility of some negligence on his part. (Bouwma, p. 29)] Opponents of church discipline perceive it to be harsh and rigid, but this was not so. Calvin wrote; “For it is not right to employ the same severity towards an offense as we do towards a crime. It is sufficient to use verbal reproof, nay, sweet and paternal reproof, not calculated to crush and embitter the sinner but more to bring him to himself in order that he may rejoice more at having been corrected rather than become grieved over it.” (Institutes, IV, xii, 8)

He was keen to see the children instructed in the Reformed faith. Within a few days of returning to Geneva he wrote up a catechism (1542) to be explained on Sundays in a meeting for the congregation.

He was a wise pastor. He knew that many of the changes he wanted to see would take time and he was prepared to wait and to go forward with slow and small steps. He was prepared to make the best of compromises and to look for suitable opportunities to advance the cause of Christ. Many of the reforms he wanted to implement only came about in the last years of his life, so he had to be patient. But he did not abandon his ideals and he refused to be satisfied with half measures. (Warfield, p. 15)

Calvin also did a great deal of **pastoral work through letters**. His correspondence has been collected into 10 volumes, made up of 4271 letters. Many of these gave advice as a pastor, or offered strength and comfort to those who were suffering. He wrote encouragement and counsel to perplexed pastors, and wrote words of strength and consolation to those facing martyrdom. (Warfield, p. 14)

He wrote a letter to the father of a young man who died from one of the plagues that swept through Geneva. This letter of comfort shows a great compassion, depth of insight into the human heart, a sympathy for others in their grief, as well as very helpful directions and encouragements from God's word. Schaff. 202ff

He wrote a letter to Des Gallars, a pastor on loan to the Church in Paris, who was facing great difficulty and persecution. Calvin encouraged him to remain in his congregation in the city, despite the disturbances. "If you leave your post during these first disturbances we fear, not without reason, that your departure will cast down the spirits of all, indeed, almost drive them to the extremes of despair. You know how the presence of a single leader can hold together a whole army... There is no need for me to emphasise how dear your life is to us; but if the safety of so many souls were not more dear to us, we should not be dear to you." P. 331f. (Philip Hughes, editor and translator, The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1966..

Throughout his life he kept up a correspondence with Duchess Renee (Renata) of Ferrara, Italy, whom he came to know and who embraced the Reformation cause and who consulted him as her spiritual adviser.

Warfield wrote; "In these letters we see the real Calvin, the man of profound religious convictions and rich religious life, of high purpose and noble strenuousness, of full and freely flowing human affections and sympathies... Perhaps no friend ever more affectionately leaned on his friends; certainly no friend ever gave himself more ungrudgingly to his friends." (Warfield, p. 14)

His warmth as a pastor was also evident in his **relationship with his wife**, as it ought to be for all of us who are pastors. He enjoyed a loving and happy marriage with Idelette de Bure, a widow with several children, although they were only married for nine years before she died in 1549. His letters to others upon her death showed how much he loved her and missed her. **Quote letter....** Bouwsma, p. 23)

Regarding the work of the pastor he wrote; "The most important duty of the ministers of the word is, to comfort wretched men...to point out what is true rest and serenity of mind. (Isaiah IV:53) He sought to put this into practice in his own ministry and was busy and attentive to the needs around him. He looked after the poor and widows. He was kind and warm, conscientious and faithful.

He was also extremely diligent. Commenting on the charge, “Be diligent in these things” (1 Tim 4:15) he wrote, “Paul reminds Timothy that there is no place in this work for indolence or slackness, for it requires the greatest carefulness and assiduity.” (Calvin, Commentary on 1 Timothy 4:15). One writer explains how Calvin put this into practice in his own ministry; “He robbed himself of sleep. His home was always open to anyone seeking advice. He was constantly in touch with the affairs of church and state. He visited the sick and lackadaisical, and knew almost every citizen; all in the midst of continuing illness, writing, heavy commitments in preaching and lecturing and attention to the minutiae that crowd every pastor’s life.” Jim van Zyl, John Calvin the Pastor, in *The Way Ahead*, p. 73)

Nicolas Calladon saw his labour in his home in Geneva and wrote; “I do not believe there can be found his like. For who could recount his ordinary and extraordinary labours? I doubt if any man in our time has had more to listen to, to reply to, to write, or things of greater importance.... He never ceased working, day and night, in the service of the Lord, and heard most unwillingly the prayers and exhortations that his friends addressed to him every day to give himself some rest.” Calvin himself wrote to de Falais (March 1546); “The difficulty arises from the annoyances and interruptions of the train of thought which intervenes to break off a letter in the midst twenty times over, or even more, beyond all bounds.” (Parker, John Calvin, A Biography, p. 103) He returned to Geneva on September 13 1541. In January of the next year he wrote; “Since my arrival here I can only remember having been granted two hours in which no one has come and disturbed me.” (Cadier, p. 119)

His constant work, lack of sleep, and neglect of his body no doubt contributed to his premature death. Better to burn out than rust out; yet better still to find a happy mean between these two extremes. If we who are pastors are to keep serving the Lord for as many years as he gives us we need to look after ourselves spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. On the charge of Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:13ff Calvin wrote; “...Paul shows how difficult and rare an achievement it is to persevere rightly in the ministry of the gospel right to the end.” (Calvin’s Commentary on 1 Timothy 6:13)

Calvin worked closely with **the other pastors in Geneva**. He wrote; “Mutual love among ministers is demanded above all things, that they may be employed, with one accord, in building up the Church of God” (John II:123) and he put this into practice. He dedicated his commentary on Titus to “two eminent servants of Christ, William Farel and Peter Viret, his dearly beloved brethren and colleagues.” He wrote; “I think that there has never been, in ordinary life, a circle of friends so

sincerely bound to each other as we have been in our ministry. With both of you I discharged here the office of pastor, and so far from there being any appearance of rivalry, I always seemed to be of one mind with you.” (Dedication to Commentary on Titus).

The other ministers of the district held him in the highest regard. For most of his ministry in Geneva he was the Chairman of the Company of Pastors. After his death the Company recorded the following in their meeting of 2 June 1564; “As for the late M Calvin, who has been like a father in the midst of the Company and also to each of its members separately, God has implanted so many graces in him and had invested him with such authority towards the people, thereby enabling each one of us the better to discharge the duties of his ministry, that, had we been bound to make a choice for every year, we could not have considered any other member of the Company... God, indeed, so blessed his conduct that in all affairs, especially those that affect our ministry, the Company had never been destitute of good and wise counsel; and as there had never been any suspicion of his seeking advantage for himself or his family, so also he preserved a healthy equality.” The Company then decided that in the future a member of the Company should be elected annually to act as the chairman as they “feared that, should an individual again in the future possess many gifts from God, in the long run he would not employ them with such prudence, moderation, and humility as Calvin had continued to do, for the honour of God and the profit of the Company.” (Philip Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1966. p. 363f

In the last week of his life he called the other pastors to his bedside and told them, among other things; “I have had many faults that you had to tolerate, and all that I accomplished was of little significance... My faults have always displeased me and the root of the fear of the Lord has always been in my heart. As for my doctrine, I have always taught faithfully, and God has given me grace to write, which I have done as faithfully as I could.” (Robert L Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, Christian Focus, Great Britain, 2004, p.129)

There have been hundreds of thousands of pastors who have served the Lord in local congregations throughout the world over the last 2000 years. Very few of them are remembered as we recall the life and work of John Calvin in this year of the 500th anniversary of his birth. He was an extraordinary theologian, exegete, writer, preacher, and pastor. Yet even with all this Maurice Roberts claims, “The Reformers were first and foremost religious men...they were men of God and ministers of Christ”, and he cites Calvin as an example. (Roberts, *The Thought of God*, p. 10). As we do our work in our own small corner of the Lord’s church and kingdom, may we too be “men of

God and ministers of Christ”, thanking the Lord that we can make use of the written work and pastoral example of this servant of the Lord.

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