

## John Calvin: Servant of the Word

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### Introduction

While the Church had known schism before, its sixteenth-century programme of reform led to its fragmentation the likes of which it had not known since the ‘Great Schism’ some five centuries earlier. The magisterial reformers were understandably concerned about the centrifugal force that their programme encouraged, and they did not dismiss lightly Rome’s sharp indictment that disunity indicated defect. This concern is evident in one of the more ‘catholic’ of the Reformed confessions, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) penned by Huldrych Zwingli’s student Heinrich Bullinger: ‘We are reproached because there have been manifold dissensions and strife in our churches since they departed themselves from the Church of Rome, and therefore cannot be true churches.’<sup>1</sup> In response, and by way of marking some distance from more radical wings of the reformation, the magisterial reformers reminded Rome of her own history of conflict and fragmentation, and, more substantively, addressed the question of what constitutes ‘true church.’ Their conclusion, précised by John Calvin, is well known: ‘Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.’<sup>2</sup> These two ‘marks’ function not as boundaries so much as

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1. Heinrich Bullinger, ‘A Simple Confession and Exposition of the Orthodox Faith: The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566’, in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Arthur C Cochrane (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2003): 264.
  2. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.i.9. Unless otherwise stated, this is the edition published by Westminster Press, Philadelphia, in 1977.

‘directional signs that point to the core of faithful church life.’<sup>3</sup> They recall that no matter how frequently or intentionally the Church may engage in additional practices or activities, the most basic, indispensable and controlling hub of its life remains its witness to the Word of God from pulpit, font and table. This chapter will be concerned mainly with the place that the former occupied in Calvin’s ministry and thought, and it asks what remains serviceable about Calvin’s homiletic for those who preach—and for those who hear and taste—the Word of God today.

Peter Steinfel’s recent piece in the *New York Times* recalls that ‘Calvin is often imagined, if he is imagined at all, as the implacable snoop who enforced a prudish morality on the citizens of Geneva, a steely spinner of harsh theological doctrines about a depraved humanity and a fierce God predestining people to heaven or hell.’<sup>4</sup> The truth is that, as Marilynne Robinson has observed, ‘People know to disapprove of [Calvin], though not precisely why they should.’<sup>5</sup> They also know that Calvin was ‘an eighteenth-century Scotsman, a prude and obscurantist with a buckle on his hat, possibly a burner of witches, certainly the very spirit of capitalism.’<sup>6</sup> Bruce Gordon’s recent work paints Calvin as not only ‘brilliant, visionary and iconic,’ but also as one who ‘intimidated, bullied and humiliated.’<sup>7</sup> But when Gordon comes to enquire what it was that made Calvin great, what made Calvin Calvin, he unequivocally concludes that it was Calvin’s ‘brilliance as a thinker and writer, and, above all, his ability to interpret the Bible.’<sup>8</sup> While today’s preachers will not want to embrace every facet of Calvin’s homiletical method, there remains, nonetheless, some abidingly valuable things that those who preach, and those who listen to, sermons can learn from Calvin. It is these more constructive elements that this essay will seek to highlight.

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3. Joseph D Small, ‘A Church of the Word and Sacrament’, in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present*, edited by Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: WmB Eerdmans, 2003): 312.

4. Peter Steinfels, ‘Man of Contradictions, Shaper of Modernity. Age? 500 Next Week’, *The New York Times*, 4 July 2009, A14.

5. Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005), 174.

6. Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 206.

7. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), vii.

8. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin*, viii.

James Nichols, among others, has argued that ‘Whatever else it was, the Reformation was a great preaching revival, probably the greatest in the history of the Christian church.’<sup>9</sup> This reflects a conviction among the magisterial reformers that preaching (and so pastors<sup>10</sup>) is not only indispensable to Christianity, but that it is also the primary means by which Calvin and others (including the council of Geneva) expected God to transform the Swiss city and the known world.<sup>11</sup> But as central as preaching was to the ‘man who spoke,’<sup>12</sup> the ministry of the Word, for Calvin, comprises more than public speech, and includes catechism, private exhortation, authoring liturgy, as well as civic and ecclesiastical administration. Between 1555 and his death in 1564, and whilst racked by constant pain, ill health and grief, Calvin laboured to establish an education system, to arrange for the care of refugees, the aged and the poor, and to continue the revision of the city’s governance—all of which he considered part of the ministry of the Word. We might understand Calvin’s various ministries of the Word under a five-fold form: as writer, as public speaker, as advocate of church discipline, as minister to individuals, and as liturgist.<sup>13</sup>

## Ministries of the Word

### *Calvin the writer*<sup>14</sup>

While best known for the various editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin also wrote theological treatises such as the *Genevan Confession of Faith* (1536), the *Confession of Faith Concerning the Eucharist* (1537), the short *Treatise on the Lord’s Supper* (1541), and

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9. James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 29.

10. See the French (Gallican) Confession of 1559.

11. See Calvin, *Commentaries*, XIXb.424. Unless otherwise stated, *Commentaries* refers to the twenty-two-volume set published by Baker Books between 1999 and 2003 and which were originally printed for the Calvin Translation Society. These have been variously translated by James Anderson, Henry Beveridge, Charles William Bingham, J King, John Owen, and William Pringle.

12. Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/T & T Clark, 2003), 288.

13. On Calvin as liturgist, see Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Baker/Apollos, 1993), 126, note 8.

14. Here I follow Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 61–6.

the *Catechism for the Church of Geneva* (1545). To these we might add his *Reply to Sadolet* in 1539. But it was not only theology that attracted Calvin's pen. He also wrote documents on Church order such as his articles *Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva* (1537), *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541), and the *Ordinances for the Supervision of Churches in the Country* (1547), all examples of Calvin's upholding of the centrality of the ministry of the Word in the Church. Thirdly, he wrote commentaries on most books of the Bible, many of which were conceived from his public teaching and preaching. Finally, Calvin wrote letters, not only to the kings of England, Denmark and Poland, and to the king and queen of Navarre, but also to fellow reformers in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands and England, to prisoners and martyrs, and to his friends. Jean-Daniel Benoît properly attests that Calvin considered his letter-writing a key aspect of his ministry of the Word.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Calvin the public speaker*

Calvin's focus during his first period in Geneva was lectures, but it was not long before he was 'elected pastor' and so began his two-fold work of lecturing and preaching.<sup>16</sup> He continued this pattern even when banished from Geneva in 1538 which led, from September, to his serving the French Church in Strasbourg where, in addition to his lectures on the New Testament (beginning with John's Gospel and 1 Corinthians) at the Strasbourg Academy, he preached, it would seem, four times a week.

From the time of Calvin's return to Geneva in 1541, his principal point of contact with Genevans was the pulpit. The expectation of Genevans during Calvin's time was that Sunday would begin with a

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15. See Jean-Daniel Benoît, 'Calvin the Letter-Writer', in *John Calvin*, edited by Gervase E Duffield (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966), 67–101; Jean-Daniel Benoît, *Calvin in His Letters: A Study of Calvin's Pastoral Counselling, Mainly from his Letters* (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1986).

16. *Ioannis Calvinii Opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by Guilielmus Baum *et al.* (Corpus Reformatorum; Brunsvigae/Berlin: Apud CA Schwetschke et Filium, 1863–1900), 21:58. [Hereafter *Opera Calvinii*.] One recalls Heinrich Ott's claim that 'the separation between the duties of preaching and theological teaching is a purely practical technical division of labour.' Heinrich Ott, *Theology and Preaching: A Programme of Work in Dogmatics, Arranged with Reference to Questions I–II of the Heidelberg Catechism* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 23.

daybreak service comprising a one-hour sermon, be followed by a catechism class for children at midday, and conclude with another sermon at three o'clock. Sermons were also fixed for Monday, Tuesday and Friday mornings until, in 1549, they increased to every day of the week.<sup>17</sup> Speaking with few or no notes, though still prepared,<sup>18</sup> Calvin's practice was to preach twice each Sunday at Saint-Pierre's and once every day on alternate weeks. On Sundays his usual practice was to preach through the New Testament, with the exception of a few Psalms on Sunday afternoons. During the week, his sermons were almost always from the Old Testament.<sup>19</sup> As age and poor health restricted his movement, he requested to be carried to church in a chair in order to fulfill his pulpit responsibilities. In his fifty-five years, Calvin preached over 2,300 sermons (some forty-four volumes), including 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 194 on 1 and 2 Samuel, 189 on the Acts of the Apostles, 174 on Ezekiel, and 159 on Job.

In addition to preaching, Calvin lectured to the Friday Congrégation and, later, before the Academy of Geneva, an institute dedicated to the study of theology and to the training of pastors. On Calvin's assessment, the quality of pastoral ministry in Geneva was in serious need of attention. Consequently, with his support, the period between 1541 and 1546 witnessed a drastic transformation of the pastoral ministry landscape, wherein local Genevan pastors were replaced by well-educated Frenchmen closely aligned to Calvin and eager to support his programme of reform. With the support of the Consistory and the Congrégation of Pastors, Calvin arranged for well-respected ministers who had a long-standing record of serving the French evangelical cause—such as Nicolas des Gallars, Reymond Chauvet, François Bourgoing, Michel Cop, and others—to come to Geneva and to play a leading role in Church reform.

Calvin spoke frequently at the Friday Congrégation which probably met at seven or nine in the morning after worship, which preceded the meeting of the Company of Pastors, and which afforded ministers

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17. *Opera Calvini*, 10a:288. In 1549, the city council decreed that pastors would preach daily. Calvin, who was concerned that pastors would burn out, opposed this decree.

18. See *Opera Calvini*, 26:473–4.

19. The Reformation—and particularly its Calvinistic branch—marked the first step in many centuries of a genuine recovery of the Old Testament for the Church.

and some lay persons from Geneva and surrounds the opportunity to gather together for Bible study, mutual admonition, and worship.<sup>20</sup> These *Congrégations* (which began under Farel's leadership in Geneva from 1536, and which were modelled after the so-called *Prophezei* (school of the prophets) in Zurich) encouraged public discourse on the Bible, a radical concept but one which was quickly established as 'central to the life of the Reformed community in Geneva.'<sup>21</sup> Plainly, Calvin recognised that while circumstances dictated flexibility of approach, ecclesiastical reform 'depended on the ability of the ministers to teach true doctrine and administer the sacraments in a disciplined community.'<sup>22</sup> Consistent with this claim, in January 1537, the Genevan preachers presented the city council with their *Articles Concerning the Organisation of the Church*, a document possibly drafted by Farel which outlined the implementation of weekly celebration of Holy Communion, excommunication, the catechesis of young people, singing in worship, and the substitution of Roman marriage laws.

Calvin lectured three times a week. September 1536 saw Calvin begin a series of lectures (probably on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans) to a small group who gathered in the cathedral of Saint-Pierre. Still a year later he was lecturing daily on the New Testament at the Latin school just outside Geneva. Modelled on the Academy in Lausanne, the Genevan Academy was finally opened in 1559 under the rectorship of Theodore Beza. The Academy was 'a triumph of Christian humanism,'<sup>23</sup> and the *schola publica* (upper school) welcomed Calvin as one of its two theological professors, Calvin being responsible for teaching Old Testament. He never taught theology as a separate subject. The creation of the Academy paralleled Calvin's conviction that pastors are fundamentally guides for the congregation's reading of Scripture. This required pastors skilled in reading the 'spectacles'<sup>24</sup> of faith themselves, and sponsored the ideal of educated pastors lit-

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20. See Erik A de Boer, 'The *Congrégation*: An In-Service Theological Training Center for Preachers to the People of Geneva', in *Calvin and the Company of Pastors: Papers Presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society, May 22–24, 2003, the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana*, edited by David L Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC, 2004): 57–87.

21. Gordon, *Calvin*, 71.

22. Gordon, *Calvin*, 314.

23. Gordon, *Calvin*, 299.

24. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vi.1.

erate in Hebrew, Greek and Classical Latin. It also meant that Calvin was about forming an entire generation of pastors who would be concerned with the gospel rather than with fostering a Calvin cult. Indeed, some ‘evidence of [Calvin’s] success may lie in the fact that one can read very far into the voluble literature of his tradition—not a tradition inclined to spare citations or balk at footnotes—and never find him quoted or even alluded to.’<sup>25</sup>

The Academy served not only the members of the college, pastors and temporary residents in Geneva, but also students from all over Europe (mainly from France, but also from Scotland, Poland, Hungary and England), many of whom had come to Geneva to train as pastors with a view to returning to their native lands to evangelise and to plant churches. Little wonder then that Calvin’s lectures on the prophets include as one of their *foci* the evangelistic mission of the Church. Calvin’s contemporary, Peter Viret, estimated that by 1561 around one thousand people attended Calvin’s lectures every day, the same year that the Venerable Company of Pastors in Geneva sent 151 ministers to serve Reformed churches in France, a number significantly short of the demand.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Calvin as advocate of church discipline*

For Calvin, the ministry of the Word extended to the implementation of a bible-informed church polity and pattern of life among Genevans. This found voice through his work on the *Church Ordinances* and through his membership of the Consistory. In his *Instruction in Faith*, where he treats the matter of the power of binding and loosing from Matthew 16:19, Calvin reminds pastors that

. . . this power (which in the Scriptures is attributed to pastors) is wholly contained in and limited to the ministry of the word. For Christ has not given this power properly to these men, but to his word of which he has made these men ministers. Hence, let these pastors boldly dare all things by the word of God, of which they

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25. Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 192–3.

26. See Peter J Wilcox, ‘Restoration, Reformation and the Progress of the Kingdom of Christ: Evangelisation in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin, 1555–1564’ (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1993), 58–65.

have been constituted dispensators; let them constrain all the power, glory and haughtiness of the world to make room for and to obey the majesty of that word; let them by means of that word command all from the greatest to the smallest; let them edify the house of Christ; let them demolish the reign of Satan . . . but all through and within the word of God. Pastors who substitute their own fancies for the word are to be chased away as wolves. For Christ has commanded us to listen only to those who teach us that which they have taken from his word.<sup>27</sup>

### *Calvin as pastor to individuals*

Although never 'ordained', Calvin was before all else a pastor, and one who carried the conviction concerning the pastoral task that 'the manner of teaching not only consists in public discourses, but also has to do with private admonitions'.<sup>28</sup> Or, as he penned elsewhere: 'As to the pastors, . . . their office is to proclaim the Word of God, to instruct, admonish, exhort and censure, both in public and private.'<sup>29</sup> So Randall Zachman observes:

The bulk of Calvin's work as a preacher, unlike his work as a teacher, consists of applying that doctrine [gleaned from Scripture] to the lives of the members of his congregation, and exhorting them to be transformed by the power of the doctrine they are hearing, which is none other than the power of Christ working by his Spirit. However, such general preaching to the whole congregation is just the first step of the pastor's application of Scripture; the real work begins when the pastor visits every member of the congregation in private in order to apply scriptural doctrine specifically to them.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Cited in John T McNeill, 'The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin', in *Church History* 28/2 (1959): 138.

28. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.6.

29. 'Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances, September & October 1541', in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, translated by JKS Reid (London: SCM Press, 1954), 58.

30. Randall C Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 65; compare



And Calvin's contemporary, Nicolas Colladon, describes Calvin's life and ministry thus:

Calvin for his part did not spare himself at all, working far beyond what his powers and regard for his health could stand . . . 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 them and counselling them and consoling them by letters when they were being persecuted, and also interceding for them, or getting another to intercede when he thought he saw an opening.<sup>31</sup>

Again, the point here is simply to highlight the multifaceted shape of Calvin's comprehension of the ministry of the Word. We turn now to preaching.

## The Function of Preaching

### *Preaching as divine accommodation*

With some indebtedness to Chrysostom,<sup>32</sup> Calvin contends that by employing human speech, God not only accommodates to the varying circumstances and 'customs of each age and nation,'<sup>33</sup> but also, in Christ, 'God in a manner makes himself little, that he might accommodate himself to our comprehension.'<sup>34</sup> Chaperoned by the Spirit,

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THL Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 80–1.

31. Cited in THL Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 62–3.
32. See John R Walchenbach, 'John Calvin as Biblical Interpreter: An Investigation into Calvin's Use of John Chrysostom as an Exegetical Tutor' (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1974); Najeeb George Awad, 'The Influence of John Chrysostom's Hermeneutics on John Calvin's Exegetical Approach to Paul's Epistle to the Romans', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 63/4 (2010): 414–36.
33. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.x.30.
34. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXIIb.54. In his sermon on Job 38:1–4, Calvin recalls God's gracious condescension to Job through Elihu so that Job would not be overwhelmed by God's immediacy but would receive God's Word in an accessible way. Calvin argues that this is how God continues to work by way of human ministers. Unfortunately, this approach, as Job's response illustrates, is not always

therefore, God's Word is 'suited to us'.<sup>35</sup> The divine decision to self-disclose extends to the human inscripturation of God's soteriologically-shaped engagement with creation in language available and apposite to us. So, 'the creatureliness of the Bible is no hindrance to hearing God's Word but rather the completely necessary condition' for so doing.<sup>36</sup> The sometimes crude and unrefined grammar of the Bible, and the protoscientific descriptions of God's creative activity, do not, for Calvin, undermine Scripture's authority but instead bear witness to the means by which God re-presents 'himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us'.<sup>37</sup>

Preaching, for Calvin, represents a further example of divine accommodation, and this in (at least) three ways. First, through preaching God addresses us 'in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away'.<sup>38</sup> Christ, Calvin contends, declares himself through his ministers in such a way that 'their *mouth* [is] to be reckoned as his *mouth* and their *lips* as his *lips*'.<sup>39</sup> 'God', Calvin writes, 'does not speak openly from heaven, but employs men as his instruments, that by their agency he may make known his will'.<sup>40</sup> When God speaks via servants it is, Calvin writes, 'as though he were nigh to us, face to face'.<sup>41</sup> And again:

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successful, in which cases God reverts to the opposite course—of overwhelming Job (and us) with his greatness and majesty: '... one will have some scruples, and some troubles in his conscience, another will be afflicted by illnesses, another will have other adversities'. Calvin, *Sermons from Job*, translated by LeRoy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 290–1. See also David F Wright, 'Calvin's "Accommodation" Revisited', in *Calvin as Exegete: Papers and Responses Presented at the Ninth Colloquium on Calvin and Calvin Studies, 1993*, edited by Peter De Klerk (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1995), 171–90.

35. Paul Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 19.
36. THL Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 102. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xi.1; I.xiii.1; Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, edited and translated by Benjamin Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 153; Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIIb.119.
37. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.13.
38. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5.
39. Calvin, *Commentaries*, VIIa.381 emphasis Calvin; compare Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIIIb.553.
40. Calvin, *Commentaries*, VIIIb.172; compare Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIIb.106; and Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXI.241.
41. Calvin, *Coomentaries*, XVa.343.

‘God does not wish to be heard but by the voice of his ministers, who he employs to instruct us.’<sup>42</sup>

Second, Calvin believes God uses pastors to train our humility. He writes:

If [God] spoke from heaven, it would not be surprising if his sacred oracles were to be reverently received without delay by the ears and minds of all . . . But when a puny man risen from the dust speaks in God’s name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we show ourselves teachable toward his minister, although he excels us in nothing.<sup>43</sup>

Implicit here is Calvin’s conviction that in the face of human pride, it is appropriate that ‘God purposely selects vile and worthless persons to instruct and warn us.’<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, he writes, ‘That the Lord . . . should employ inconsiderable men in publishing his Word, may not be quite so agreeable to the human mind. But it tends to humble the pride of the flesh and try the obedience of faith; and therefore God approves of it.’<sup>45</sup> One might here recall Alan Lewis’ words:

The human brokenness of the Church and of her preachers—intellectual, moral and emotional—only highlights the mystery of proclamation. For it encapsulates the risk which entrusts the Word of God to the implausible and the impotent, and assigns solely to the reality of that Word’s presence, any persuasiveness and creativity in the words of the church.<sup>46</sup>

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42. Calvin, *Commentaries*, VIIIb.61; compare Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIIb.396–7.

43. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.1.

44. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIIb.387.

45. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIa.124; See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5; IV.iii.1; Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, translated by Arthur Golding and revised by Leslie Rawlinson and SM Houghton (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 376.

46. Alan E Lewis, ‘Kenosis and Kerygma: the Realism and the Risk of Preaching’, in *Christ in Our Place—The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World: Essays Presented to Professor James Torrance*, edited by Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (Exeter/Allison Park: Paternoster Press/Pickwick Publications, 1989), 90–1; compare *Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus*, translated by LT [Laurence Tomson] (London: G Bishop and

Still, it is hoped that the preacher humbly submits to God. As Calvin so eloquently put it, 'It would be better for [the preacher] to break his neck going up into the pulpit if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God'.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, both pastor and proclamation serve as a bond of union between believers. If each person simply interpreted the Bible for themselves, then this would sponsor an individualism and arrogance indifferent to the gathered community. So Calvin: 'For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink, are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth'.<sup>48</sup>

Divine accommodation, therefore, recalls not only God's gracious determination to unveil before us, but also God's decision in freedom to descend to regions 'far beneath his loftiness' in order to do so. Borrowing an image from Augustine, Calvin contends that like a nurse with a young child in her arms, 'God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us'.<sup>49</sup> It is such lispings that is so splendidly echoed by 'Calvin's great modern exponent',<sup>50</sup> Karl Barth, who draws attention to the 'intrinsic freedom of God, i.e., [God's] freedom to be unlike Himself': 'That God can become unlike Himself in such a way that He is not tied to His secret eternity and eternal secrecy but can and will and does in fact take temporal form as well'<sup>51</sup> gives to such *human* action as preaching the possibility that it may be employed as the Word of God.

### *Preaching as the Word of God*

What is clear for the magisterial reformers is that the Word by and for which the Church lives is not the Church's own word, but is 'the outside word which is spoken to it, so that it cannot seize or possess or control that revelation'.<sup>52</sup> The Word is that whom the Church bows

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T Woodcock, 1579), 945–6.

47. *Opera Calvini*, 26:304; compare *Ibid.*, 27:537; 34:424; 54:286–7; 58:54.

48. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.2.

49. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.1.

50. Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 181.

51. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, edited by GW Bromiley and TF Torrance (Edinburgh T&T Clark, 2004), 320, 319.

52. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2*, edited by GW Bromiley and TF Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 545; compare Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume*

before, learns of, and participates in. For both Luther and Calvin, the *verbum Dei* (Word of God) refers not principally to Holy Scripture in itself but to the gospel concerning God's Son, the good news which creates the Bible and for which the Bible exists to bear witness. More specifically, the Word is the Son himself. So Calvin: "'Word" means the everlasting wisdom, residing in God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth.<sup>53</sup> The Word is that One by and in which the Church is birthed, lives, worships, is made one, holy and catholic, and serves God in the world. This Word is not only 'set before us in Scripture,'<sup>54</sup> but is also reproclaimed through 'all who thereafter ministered the heavenly doctrine.'<sup>55</sup> To recognise this is to confess the gracious work of the Spirit.

Calvin believes that while preaching is not the only method of divine self-disclosure,<sup>56</sup> preaching remains 'the ordinary mode which the Lord has appointed for conveying his word.'<sup>57</sup> Made efficacious by the Spirit, preaching is, 'the instrument of faith,'<sup>58</sup> the mother who produces faith, and faith is the daughter who ought not to forget her origin.<sup>59</sup> Calvin rebukes as ungrateful those who think that the Word's authority is 'dragged down by the baseness of [those] called to teach it . . . For, among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of [people] in order that his voice may resound in them.'<sup>60</sup>

Calvin differentiates between the apostolic writings (the oracles of God) and the authority of those whose commission is to teach what is revealed therein and not to frame their own doctrines. If the preaching is faithful to Scripture, 'then it is God who is speaking and that precisely because [God's] teaching remains [God's] teaching irrespective of the purveyor of the teaching.'<sup>61</sup> So Calvin in Sermon XXII on

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36: *Word and Sacrament 2*, edited by Helmut T Lehmann and Abdel R Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 107.

53. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.7.

54. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.7; I.vi.1.

55. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.7.

56. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.19.

57. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XIX.398.

58. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXIa.208; compare Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXIc.91.

59. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXb.397.

60. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xv; compare Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.1.

61. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 24.

## 1 Timothy (3:2):

When a [person] has climbed up into the pulpit, is it so that [they] may be seen from afar, and that [they] may be pre-eminent? Not at all. It is that God may speak to us by the mouth of a [human being]. And [God] does us that favour of presenting himself here and wishes a mortal [human] to be his messenger.<sup>62</sup>

This underscores Calvin's confidence that the God who speaks in Scripture delights to go on speaking as 'the living voice . . . resound[ing] in His Church,'<sup>63</sup> and that through 'the mouth of pastors.'<sup>64</sup> There is also here a clear conviction that proclamation is not 'the third-hand conveyance of fourth-rate opinions,'<sup>65</sup> but is itself the Word of God, and this in a twofold sense. First, because the Word that was given to the human authors of Scripture is forwarded on by the proclaiming community; and second, because the same Spirit by whom the Word was so graciously given the first time continues to ensure (through the proclaiming community) that the Word shall find fertile soil in every generation. It is no accident that the reformers named the Church the 'creature of the word.' As Christoph Schwöbel notes:

The church is called into being by the word of God, and the source of its life without which it would die is the divine word. The divine word reaches us through human words. The divine word calls human words into its service, making them the instruments of the communication of a message that could not be spoken by human means alone: the message of God's grace and truth for his creatures. God addressing us through the ordinary means of human communication—that is nothing less than the sanctification of human communication.<sup>66</sup>

62. *Opera Calvini*, 53:266; compare Calvin, *Sermons on Timothie and Titus*, 260–74.

63. Calvin, *Commentaries*, IIb.235.

64. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXIIa.358.

65. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 45.

66. Christoph Schwöbel, 'Introduction: The Preacher's Art: Preaching Theologically,' in *Theology Through Preaching: Sermons for Brentwood*, edited by Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh/New York: T&T Clark, 2001): 3.

Upon this truth rests Section One of the *Confessio Helvetica Posterior* penned by Calvin's ally, Heinrich Bullinger, who (in 1562 and revised in 1564) publicised that 'The Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God' (*praedictatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*):

Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.<sup>67</sup>

God confronts us precisely in the weakness of human communication. To infer that this is an unfortunate burden for faith is to miss the point. For behind this Confession is the assumption that preaching is God's instrument for carrying God's Word to God's people. It is the act in which 'Christ continues to bear witness to himself through others, so that whoever hears them hears Christ . . . If Christ did not continue to speak through his witnesses, their testimony to him would have disappeared long ago.'<sup>68</sup> What becomes increasingly apparent is that, for both Luther and Calvin, the Word is the dynamic God in the free act of gracious self-unveiling through human speech and deed.<sup>69</sup> This revelation is made possible by the crucified Word himself, and is prolonged in the proclamation of those who direct us to Christ, as is so powerfully spoken in the underside image of Lucas Cranach's 1547 altarpiece in Stadtkirche St Marien in Wittenberg. What is remarkable about the magisterial reformers' language about preaching is that they ascribe to the proclaimed Word the muscle and efficacy that the

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67. Bullinger, 'Second Helvetic Confession', 225. On Calvin's relationship with Bullinger, see Machiel A van den Berg, *Friends of Calvin* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 216–26.

68. Randall C Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 59.

69. See Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 67–8.

Medieval Church credited to the seven sacraments. Hence Brian Gerish's observation that we may fairly extend Calvin's use of the term *verbum sacramentale* (sacramental word) to denote a proclamation that not only *makes* a sacrament but also *is* a sacrament.<sup>70</sup>

Not a few have likened Calvin the *theologian* and *pastor* to a Genevan version of the Apostle Paul, highlighting particularly Paul's relationship with the Christian community at Corinth. But when it comes to our image of Calvin the *preacher* we are given something more akin to an Old Testament prophet. Indeed, in a 1552 sermon on Ezekiel, Calvin cites his opponents by way of describing himself: 'There are some who say today, "There's Calvin who makes himself a prophet, when he says that one will know that there is a prophet among us. He's talking about himself. Is he a prophet?" Well, since it is the doctrine of God I am announcing, I have to use this language.'<sup>71</sup> And in a reference to Joel, Calvin stated, 'We also shall have the title of prophet, when we are true pupils of God.'<sup>72</sup> It was through such prophetic preaching, Calvin believed, that the congregation hears the Word *as God's*<sup>73</sup> and the preacher functions as God's ambassador. So, in his sermon on 2 Timothy 1:2, Calvin says: 'It is certain that if we come to church we shall not hear only a mortal man speaking but we shall feel (even by his secret power) that God is speaking to our souls, that he is the teacher (*maistre*)'.<sup>74</sup>

For Calvin, the sermon's divine authority is 'an immediate authority' insofar as 'God is present to declare his will; it is not simply an authoritative message from one remote.'<sup>75</sup> To be sure, there is an important qualification here which concerns the words 'as if': in preaching, '[God] calls us to him *as if* he had his mouth open and we saw him there in person'. But what is being denied by this qualification is 'not the presence or the activity of God but only any sort of visible or audible perception of that presence or activity'.<sup>76</sup> Christ is present in

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70. Brian Albert Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 85–6.

71. Cited in Max Engammare, 'Calvin: A Prophet without a Prophecy', in *Church History* 67/4 (1998): 649.

72. Cited in *ibid*, 647.

73. *Opera Calvini*, 58:54.

74. *Opera Calvini*, 54:11.

75. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 42.

76. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 42. Italics mine.



preaching just as he is at the Supper; namely, by the Spirit. So God rules the Church by the preaching of God's Word; hence Calvin's designation of the pulpit as 'the throne of God, from where [God] wills to govern our souls.'<sup>77</sup> And because God elects to be heard through pastors, believers ought to be cautious of criticising pastors, or of isolating themselves from those communities wherein the Word is proclaimed.

## The Reception of the Word

### *The Word as exhortation*

While there are times when Calvin's sermons take on a harsher tone—such as those sermons preached against the tumultuous backdrop prior to the reforms in Geneva around 1553, or those preached amidst the tense relationship between Geneva and Bern in which Calvin championed a ministry of reconciliation before the relationship was healed in 1557—these are more an exception than a rule. For what is alarmingly apparent as one reads Calvin's sermons is that they betray so little indication of the stressful storms in which this preacher ministered, and so much evidence of the 'calm, gentle, [and] reasonable'<sup>78</sup> Calvin's clear, persuasive and persistent call to frame our lives according to Holy Writ.

The other noticeable feature of Calvin's sermons is a consistency with which they are propelled toward exhortation, encouragement and edification: 'We come together in the name of the Lord. It is not to hear merry songs, to be fed with wind, that is, with a vain and unprofitable curiosity, but to receive spiritual nourishment. For God will have nothing preached in his name but that which will profit and edify.'<sup>79</sup> The preacher's task lay incomplete while the congregation is left without 'instruction on the framing of one's life.'<sup>80</sup> Indubitably, most preachers—and congregations—can testify that it is precisely with the *application* of Scripture that the real homiletical challenge

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77. *Opera Calvini*, 53:520.

78. John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), 10.

79. Calvin, 'Sermon on II Timothy 2:16–18'. Cited in John H Leith, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today', in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, edited by Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 222.

80. *Opera Calvini*, 52:384.

lies. But Calvin is consistently fit for this task, embracing with due seriousness the claim that ‘God does not intend there to be churches as places for people to make merry and laugh in, as if comedy were being acted here. But there must be majesty in his Word, *by which we may be moved and affected*.’<sup>81</sup> While Calvin’s homiletical style has been described as ‘usually grave, sedate, and unfocused—perhaps even ponderous,’<sup>82</sup> his painstaking scholarship, his disciplined style, his determination to avoid speculation, his respect for original sources and vigilant attention to issues of translation and hermeneutics, and his extraordinary commitment to the exposition of Scripture was underwritten by a concern to be as practical as possible.<sup>83</sup>

### *The Word as event*

In describing revelation’s reception, Calvin employs the grammar of ‘twice born.’ The Word makes himself known through Scripture, and then reproclaims himself through the proclamation event. How this happens—and the fact that it happens—is, as Barth noted, ‘God’s affair and not ours.’<sup>84</sup> Moreover, the proclaimed Word is neither mere communication nor an action borne by human beings, but is an inherent part of the salvation event itself, defined by the uniqueness of that event in history and its consequent witness in Scripture.

Some of the themes upon which we have so far accentuated—on preaching as divine accommodation and exhortation—find specific locale in Calvin’s conviction that the sermon is always a specific word to the particular congregation in which it is heard. Sermons are ‘works of the moment,’<sup>85</sup> examples of God’s dynamic self-accommodation to this or that particular community at this or that particular time. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Calvin’s preaching is that his sermons ‘fit’ not only the biblical text, but also the moment, the place, the people who heard and read them.<sup>86</sup> One might conclude

81. *Ibid.*, 53:24. Italics mine; compare *Ibid.*, 54:287, 587.

82. Dawn DeVries, ‘Calvin’s Preaching’, in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, edited by Donald K McKim (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 121.

83. See, for example, Calvin’s *Sermons on Timothie and Titus*, 419, 1199; *Opera Calvini*, 34:423; 54:292.

84. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, 109.

85. Cottret, *Calvin*, 289.

86. See *Opera Calvini*, 2:128–9.

that Calvin considered the exegesis of his congregation, society and time to be as much a feature of the preacher's task and attentiveness as that given to the Bible itself: The preacher must address the 'real and pressing concerns of the community whether or not the people wished to hear them. Not to do so amounted to neglect of the apostolic duty.'<sup>87</sup> Indeed, it was *because* of his attentiveness to the written text that he took the human context as seriously as he did.

The Reformed sermon, therefore, is not *preparation* for divine encounter (which then comes via the Supper) but is itself *decisive* encounter with God. Unlike the way that Dante (who is here representative of Rome's position) was required to change guides as he came near heaven, for the Reformed, the sermon is, as Heiko Oberman observes, an 'apocalyptic event' by which 'the doors of Heaven and Hell are put in motion . . . The sermon does not have to try desperately to be actual because it has the highest possible actuality.'<sup>88</sup> That the sermon is such an 'event' is one of the reasons for Calvin's reluctance to have his sermons published. As his publisher, Conrad Badius, notes: '[Calvin] desired that his sermons should not extend further than his pastorate; because they were preached especially for his sheep, to whose capacity he accommodated himself as best he could.'<sup>89</sup>

### *The Word and the hermeneutical community*

The Word of God is God in God's revelation. In, through and by the Word inscripturated, God reveals God's self. The communication which is of the *esse* (being) of the triune life spills over, as it were, on to paper and out of the lips of those given to its public exposition. It is for this reason that Scripture 'enjoys the authority proper to God's communicative act' and why 'it is to be obeyed and trusted, but not worshiped.'<sup>90</sup> To preach, therefore, is to take up an invitation to 'hear' and to 'listen into' the eternal communication between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Moreover, it is to confess that that speech may invite and sanctify our speaking and hearing. Christian worship cannot be

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87. Gordon, *Calvin*, 138.

88. Heiko A Oberman, 'Preaching and the Word in the Reformation', in *Theology Today* 18/1 (1961): 19.

89. Cited in 'Publisher's Introduction: John Calvin and his Sermons on Ephesians', in Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, x.

90. Kevin J Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 65.

reduced to hearing, and the Reformed liturgy sponsors a dialogue between God, God's creatures and God's creation. Put differently, we might think of the Triune God as a pulpit: of the Father who addresses, the Son who is the content of the Father's address, and the Spirit who listens to, celebrates and makes available the Word of the Father. And because the Spirit shares what is spoken and heard between the Father and the Son *with us*, we too are gathered up into this eternal conversation—into the pulpit, as it were—and in so being gathered, our speech too is sanctified.

The application of Scripture is, for Calvin, to be directed to the wider congregation. This does not mean that he is unconcerned to address current affairs taking place in Geneva (around the 1555 City Council elections, for example, or the threat of infiltration by the Turks, who were at this time allied with France), or of engaging in what is sometimes (to our ears at least) harsh and sarcastic anti-Romanist, antiMonarchic and antiAnabaptist polemic towards those who would proffer what he calls a 'bastard Gospel'.<sup>91</sup> But, as Parker observes, Calvin's sermons are generally 'saved from fragmentation into addresses to particular groups, and the unity of the congregation is preserved, by continual generalisation'.<sup>92</sup> This does not mean that Calvin is unconcerned to address individuals. Indeed, Calvin insists that the Word *is* addressed to such, and, 'in the first place', to preachers themselves;<sup>93</sup> so Calvin's 'almost universal use of "we" and "us" and the rare address of "you"'.<sup>94</sup>

One of the most inviting features of Calvin's use of Scripture is what he coined *familière* (familiar), a reference to the responsibility of the preacher to bear witness to the reality that Scripture is personal and not simply a record of events far removed from us. 'We always try', he said, 'to make Scripture *familière*, so that we know that it is God that is speaking to us'.<sup>95</sup> Calvin the preacher 'deliberately adapts his style to the grasp of the common people in his congregation',<sup>96</sup> accommodating himself, as it were, to the congregation before him.

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91. *Opera Calvini*, 50:329, 399.

92. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 117.

93. See *Opera Calvini*, 50:327; 53:257–8.

94. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 116–17.

95. *Opera Calvini*, 53:18–19.

96. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 148.

Moreover, while Calvin ‘seldom if ever tries to persuade by pleasing . . . he tries his utmost to keep the reader [and listener] awake.’<sup>97</sup> Perfecting his style while in Strasbourg, in Geneva Calvin reproved those preachers who ‘babble in refined language,’<sup>98</sup> even though on occasion he would remind the hearer (or reader) that he too was capable of such superfluity. Though he both lectured and preached direct (mostly) from the Hebrew and Greek text, for Calvin, this fidelity to public speech as *familière*—as employing the grammar of plain, colloquial but metropolitan French, and of the Bible itself—was aided by the fact that his preaching was extempore, reflecting an economy of time at his disposal.

But congregations, for Calvin, are not passive receptors of the preacher’s labour; they are, rather, active participants and constituents in the proclamation and must work as hard as the preacher to hear and respond to God’s Word. The congregation is indispensable to the gospel’s enactment in the world, the assumption being that proclamation is a corporate action of the whole *ecclesia* (Church) and that listening is as much an act of faith as is speaking. In other words, God’s Word is addressed to, and received by, a hermeneutical community. So in the ‘Preface’ to his 1539 commentary on Romans, Calvin writes: ‘God hath never favoured his servants with so great a benefit, that they were all endued with a full and perfect knowledge in every thing; and, no doubt, for this end—that he might first keep them humble; and secondly, render them disposed to cultivate brotherly intercourse.’<sup>99</sup>

While Calvin never exhorted believers to study in advance those verses which would be preached upon, he frequently urged congregants to apprehend what the Church is claiming in and through this particular activity, and to ‘come to God’s school with burning desire, seeing that [God] seeks nothing but our welfare and salvation.’<sup>100</sup> The notion of church as school wherein all believers are both students and teachers under the Spirit’s instruction is central to Calvin’s ecclesiology: ‘. . . all Christians ought to think, “Why do we come to the ser-

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97. Quirinus Breen, ‘John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition’, in *Church History* 26/1 (1957): 8.

98. *Opera Calvini*, 53:19.

99. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XIXb.xxvii.

100. *Opera Calvini*, 54:287.

mon? Why is there [this] order in the Church? It is so that God may govern us and that we may have our Lord Jesus Christ as Sovereign Teacher, so that we may be the flock that he leads.”<sup>101</sup> Teachers who guide others in their reading of Scripture must also be willing to be taught themselves both by other teachers and by students.<sup>102</sup>

Calvin expects congregations to understand the sermon as the mode by which ‘God rules his Church by declaring his will.’<sup>103</sup> The preacher is obligated to submit unreservedly to the Scriptures, and the *ecclesia* (Church) is obligated to listen carefully and to make sure that what is preached faithfully echoes the Word of God in Scripture and avoids embellishments. So Calvin’s letter to Viret on 19 May 1540:

Zuingli [*sic*], although he is not wanting in a fit and ready exposition, yet, because he takes too much liberty, often wanders far from the meaning of the Prophet. Luther is not so particular as to propriety of expression or the historical accuracy; he is satisfied when he can draw from it some fruitful doctrine. No one, as I think, has hitherto more diligently applied himself to this pursuit than Ecolampadius, who has not always, however, reached the full scope or meaning.<sup>104</sup>

Preaching so understood is other than decanted propositions or overtures. Rather, it is Christ speaking to those ‘sitting at his feet like Mary to hear his Word; and through it “the sheep rally to his voice and stand under his crook.”’<sup>105</sup> Both preacher and congregation must ‘become a client of the Comforter in order to communicate the comfort to others.’<sup>106</sup> There is an expectation upon preacher and congregation alike to seek—and be pleased to receive—God’s Word, and congregations ought to resist the temptation to make the preachers’ task more difficult by appealing for competing words to be heard or by mak-

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101. *Ibid.*, 25:647.

102. See Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 382.

103. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 49.

104. *Letters, Part 1, 1528–1545*. Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 4:188.

105. Benoît, *Calvin in His Letters*, 187; compare John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 189.

106. Schwöbel, ‘The Preacher’s Art’, 14.

ing preachers ‘swerve aside’ from the truth and feed God’s flock with ‘pleasing stories and buffoonery or “old wives’ fables”’. Such demands, Calvin insists, constitute ‘the cause of some preachers degenerating and disguising themselves and transforming God’s teaching, which is as bad as destroying it.’<sup>107</sup>

Calvin also hoped—and anticipated—that the Word who engages the gathered congregation might continue to be received and wrestled with long after the benediction has been pronounced:

How often do we remind ourselves of the content of the sermons in order to benefit from it? How do we talk about it at home? Most of them seem to think it is sufficient to hear one sermon on Sunday as a rule. When they return, they only talk about wicked and worldly plans, instead of considering what was said in the sermon, so that they better remember what the subject has dealt with. ‘No, no, they say, it only makes us depressed to think about that; let us not agonize over it.’ . . . They are mockers and despisers of God, enemies of Him and His Word who now mock and laugh in their homes. They enjoy breakfast more than the testimony of their salvation.<sup>108</sup>

Calvin’s commitment to the hermeneutical community is likewise evident (as we have already had reason to indicate) in his sponsoring of the Genevan ‘congregations’ to gather for study on some prearranged passage of Scripture. The intent was to create space wherein the ‘congregation’ might wrestle in communal discourse in preparation for the preaching on the coming Lord’s Day. ‘For as long as there is no mutual exchange,’ Calvin writes, ‘each can teach what he likes. Solitude provides too much liberty.’<sup>109</sup> The practice of an ‘interpretative anarchy’ was as much an anathema to Calvin as the ‘interpretive monarchy’ of the pope.

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107. *Opera Calvini*, 53:371.

108. Calvin, ‘Sermon on Acts 3:17–19’. Cited in **Wilhelmus HTh Moehn**, ‘God Calls Us to His Service’: *The Relation Between God and His Audience in Calvin’s Sermons on Acts* (Geneva: Droz, 2001), 204–6.

109. *Opera Calvini*, 13:433.

*Words and 'the holy bread of heaven which gives us life'*<sup>110</sup>

When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541, he sought to make the Lord's Supper a defining centre of community life. His *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545) articulates that the institution of the signs of water, bread and wine was fashioned by God's desire to communicate to us, and that God does this by 'making himself ours'.<sup>111</sup> The signs testify to divine accommodation, to God 'teaching us in a more familiar manner that he is not only food to our souls, but drink also, so that we are not to seek any part of spiritual life anywhere else than in him alone'.<sup>112</sup> But the signs are not only God's. They are also faith's testimony to the Church's cruciform identity in the world, to its belonging, its ontology. Moreover, font and table remain places of privilege where believers expect to see, taste, hear, touch and proclaim the Word's carnality in ways not expected elsewhere. In his *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper*, written while in Strasbourg but with an eye on Geneva (where it was printed), Calvin further expanded themes introduced in his Strasbourg liturgy, notably a more christologically-determined epistemology and doctrine of assurance, and the claim that the 'substance of the sacraments is the Lord Jesus' himself.<sup>113</sup> Calvin contended that 'the singular consolation which we derive from the Supper' is that it 'directs and leads us' to Christ, attesting to the truth that 'having been made partakers of the death and passion of Jesus Christ, we have everything that is useful and salutary to us'.<sup>114</sup>

Calvin, likewise, begins his *Summary of Doctrine concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments* with the statement that 'The

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110. The reference to 'the holy bread of heaven' is from Calvin's eucharistic Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. See Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961), 204.

111. 'Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Being a Form of Instruction for Children in the Doctrine of Christ', in *Tracts and Letters, Volume 2: Tracts, Part 2*. Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 89.

112. *Tracts and Letters*, 91.

113. 'Short Treatise on the Supper of our Lord, in which is shown its True Institution, Benefit, and Utility', in Beveridge and Bonnet, *Tracts and Letters, Volume 2: Tracts, Part 2*, 169.

114. *Tracts and Letters*, 168; compare Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition* (Grand Rapids: The HH Meeter Centre for Calvin Studies/WmB Eerdmans, 1975), IV.i.



end of the whole Gospel ministry is that God, the fountain of all felicity, communicate Christ to us who are disunited by sin and hence ruined, that we may from him enjoy eternal life.<sup>115</sup> And Calvin proceeds to outline that this communication is made possible because of God's desire to 'communicate himself to us,' and involves us being joined to Christ our Head, 'not in an imaginary way, but most powerfully and truly, so that we become flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone.'<sup>116</sup> This union is effected by the Holy Spirit who 'uses a double instrument, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.' Moreover, Calvin imagines that the *unio Christi* (union with Christ) involves 'two ministers, who have distinct offices.' There is (i) the 'external minister' who 'administers the vocal word' which is 'received by the ears' and 'the sacred signs which are external, earthly and fallible'; and (ii) there is the 'internal minister,' the Spirit who 'freely works internally' to truly communicate 'the thing proclaimed through the Word, that is Christ.'<sup>117</sup> Clearly, for Calvin, the sacraments are essentially another form of the Word. They are, after Augustine, the *verbum visibile* ('a visible word'), 'God's promises as painted in a picture' and set before our sight.<sup>118</sup> They confer neither more nor less than the Word, and they have the same function as the Word preached and written—to offer and present Christ to us. They are, just as preaching is, the 'vehicle of Christ's self-communication,' pledges of Christ's 'real presence' and the 'media through which Christ *effects* his presence to his people.'<sup>119</sup>

The separation of pulpit, font and table, and the prioritising of 'words' over the proclamation activities of baptism and eucharist, betray a failure by Christian communities to understand how these three particular activities might inform—and be informed by—theories of semiotics, ritual, dramaturgy and the sociology of knowledge.

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115. 'Summary of Doctrine concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments,' in Read, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 171.

116. *Ibid.*, 171.

117. *Tracts and Letters*, 173.

118. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.6.

119. Brian Albert Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 111. Emphasis Gerrish; compare Trevor A Hart, 'Calvin and Barth on the Lord's Supper,' in *Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology*, edited by Neil B MacDonald and Carl Trueman (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2008): 41–2.

It is also, and more urgently, a failure to understand the nature and witness of the Word in the Church's 'two marks', and of the way the Spirit functions to create faith in us and to make us 'living members of Christ'.<sup>120</sup> This has, consequently, sponsored both disproportion between word and sacrament, and a tendency towards binitarianism, both to the detriment of Reformed worship and ecclesiology. As Joseph Small has noted:

If word and sacraments together are the heart of the church's true and faithful life, neglect of one leads inexorably to deformation of the other, for when either word or sacrament exists alone it soon becomes a parody of itself . . . Reformed neglect of the sacraments has led to a church of the word alone, a church always in danger of degenerating into a church of mere words.<sup>121</sup>

While Calvin argued that 'it would be well to require that the Communion of the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ be held every Sunday at least as a rule',<sup>122</sup> forlornly, many Reformed churches have propagated a situation wherein the pulpit and its associated wordiness have eclipsed the sacraments, sponsoring an arid intellectualism which has reduced the worshipping community into 'a class of glum schoolchildren'.<sup>123</sup> It is not uncommon to witness Baptism's reduction to little more than a welcoming ceremony, for the Supper to be celebrated infrequently, and for fonts and tables to be discarded in favour of a pulpit which stands unbefriended in the centre of the chancel. In more appalling cases, the pulpit has joined font and table as relics on the sidelines, casualties of modernity's techno gods and replaced by the 'sacraments' of personality and PowerPoint. Calvin, conversely, placed sacrament and word together at the heart of the community's life not because he was a dreary traditionalist or obstructionist but because he 'regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace'.<sup>124</sup>

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120. 'Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments', 173.

121. Small, 'A Church of the Word and Sacrament', 315.

122. 'Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva 1537', in Read, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 49.

123. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 82.

124. Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, IV.vii; Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.17.

## By way of conclusion

When, in 1950, the city of Hamburg celebrated the anniversary of the death of Johann Sebastian *Bach*, Paul Hindemith recalled that:

In the two hundred years since [Bach's] death each rising generation has seen him differently; his creations have been analyzed and criticized, performed and deformed, used and abused; books and pamphlets, paintings and plaster busts have made him a common household article; in short he has finally been transformed into a statue. It seems to me that having this statue constantly before our eyes has impaired our view of the true stature of Bach, both of the man and of his work.<sup>125</sup>

A similar assessment might be offered regarding Calvin. While this essay paints a largely positive—perhaps too positive—portrait of Calvin, I confess to being entirely uninterested in emboldening a Calvin cult. I began with a basic question: what remains serviceable about Calvin's homiletic for those who preach—and for those who hear and taste—the Word of God today? Does Calvin's theology and practice of preaching have some purchase in recalling what the Church is called to in an age and culture so radically removed from sixteenth-century Geneva? Calvin encourages the Church to return to its ground, centre and end in the Word of God; to embrace with confidence its missional life in light of that Word; to repent of the godless banality and trivialisation of its worship and to recover its nutrition in the Spirit's gifts of Bible, font and table; to recognise that while the Church is concerned with the publication of God's Word, the copyright remains with the author; to reject self-veneration and be given over to service of the Word fleshed out in the living documents of congregations; that *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda est secundum Verbum Dei* (the reformed Church must be always reforming according to the Word of God) is a call to being reformed by the Spirit and the Word rather than an invitation to an 'endless cycle of idea and action, endless invention, [and] endless experiment'<sup>126</sup> for its own sake; to

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125. Cited in Michael Steinberg and Larry Rothe, *For the Love of Music: Invitations to Listening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117.

126. TS Eliot, 'Choruses from "The Rock"—1934', in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963): 147.

celebrate God's desire to be known and God's making apposite accommodation to that end; to recall that while God's principal apostle and prophet is Christ himself, proclamation still demands a lot of both preacher and congregation; that there is gospel-logic in making the training of ministers of the Word a priority for the Church's time, energy and budget; and to live in hope that the One who addresses his priesthood in the event of faithful preaching is the very Word of God, and that that address occurs so that the first fruit of a new reconciled and reconciling humanity might know that its very life, diet, and future, remain in God alone.

# **Calvin, The Man and The Legacy**

**Edited by  
Murray Rae, Peter Matheson  
and Brett Knowles**



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