

INTRODUCTION

Interpreting and proclaiming God's Word was at the center of John Calvin's vocation as a Christian pastor and religious reformer. Calvin's commitment to the ministry of the Word was already on display in his preface to his cousin Pierre Olivétan's French Bible published in the summer of 1535. In his preface, Calvin acknowledged that Olivétan's Bible was illegal in that it lacked official approval from the Catholic king, Francis I; but even so, 'the King of Kings is the guarantor of the privilege [to publish it]!' Calvin went on to insist that all people, men and women alike, were invited to read and benefit from God's Word, no matter their social rank or training. After all, 'since the Lord has chosen prophets for himself from the ranks of shepherds [and] apostles from the boats of fisherman, why should he not even now condescend to choose similar disciples?' The importance of making God's Word accessible to everyone was thus central to Calvin's concerns: 'But I desire only this, that the faithful people be permitted to hear their God speaking and to learn from his teaching.' With this striking statement, Calvin articulated a vision for ministry that served as his lodestar for the next three decades.

John Calvin was born in the cathedral town of Noyon, France on July 10, 1509 to devout Catholic parents, Gérard and Jeanne Lefranc, who determined early on that their gifted son should prepare for the priesthood. In 1523, Calvin was sent to Paris to begin his formal education, first at the Collège de la Marche, and then at the more prestigious Collège de Montaigu, where he earned his arts degree in 1528. At that moment, a sudden change occurred in Calvin's life that altered the trajectory of his future plans: Gérard fell out of favor with the bishop of Noyon, and decided that his son should pursue a career in law rather than theology. Hence, in 1528, Calvin dutifully matriculated at the University of Orléans – and later moved on to the University of Bourges – where he received

legal training from two of the great jurists of the age. More importantly, during this period Calvin became a partisan of French humanist culture that championed the study of the humane letters (*studia humanitatis*), the cultivation of eloquence, and the retrieval and mastery of classical texts in their original languages of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Central to the humanists' concern was to glean wisdom from these ancient sources for the purpose of fostering renewal in church and society in sixteenth-century Europe. Though Calvin earned his license in law in 1531, his devotion to the humane letters now took priority. He moved to Paris and associated with a group of reform-minded humanists as he read the church fathers, studied the Greek New Testament, began to learn Hebrew, and composed his first published work, a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* (1532). In his religious outlook, Calvin was becoming increasingly critical of the Catholic church and calling for evangelical reforms according to the Word of God.

Calvin's sympathies for religious reform became apparent on November 1, 1533 when his boyhood friend, the newly appointed university rector, Nicholas Cop, delivered an inaugural address that espoused controversial Protestant themes. Rumors circulated that Calvin himself had assisted Cop in writing the inflammatory speech. With the authorities in pursuit, Calvin was forced to flee Paris and seek safety in the south of France, under the protective wing of the reform-minded princess Marguerite d'Angoulême (the sister of Francis I). Later in the spring of 1534, he returned to Noyon, his boyhood home, and resigned the two church stipends (*benefices*) that he had held since childhood. Calvin was strategically severing ties of loyalty with the traditional church. Many years later, Calvin spoke cryptically of the 'sudden conversion' (*subita conversio*) to teachableness that he experienced during these formative years. Most likely, this growing teachableness emerged from the influence of French

humanism, the writings of Protestant reformers like Martin Luther, and Calvin's own study of the biblical text. By 1535, Calvin had decisively broken from the Catholic church of his youth and found refuge in the Protestant city of Basel. It was there, in 1536, that he published the first edition of the theological text that would make him famous, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536; final Latin edition, 1559).

No one could have predicted that John Calvin's life story would become intertwined with the history of the Reformation in Geneva. The human agent responsible for this twist of providence was a fiery reformer named Guillaume Farel who, in July 1536, confronted John Calvin as he passed through Geneva on his way to Strasbourg. From Farel's perspective, Calvin was the perfect candidate to provide theological leadership for a fledgling church that had only recently escaped the tyranny of the papal religion. Calvin later described this famous encounter with unusual flare:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility 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; but sensible of my natural bashfulness and timidity, I would not bring myself under obligation to discharge any particular office.

Fearing God's judgment, a timid Calvin agreed to remain in Geneva – a second decisive change in his life circumstances. With the exception of a three-year hiatus in Strasbourg from 1538–41, John Calvin served the Genevan church as a refugee pastor, preacher, theologian, and founder of the Genevan Academy until his death in 1564. His theological precision and commitment to moral discipline transformed

the Genevan church into a reformed bastion that attracted the praise of foreign visitors, including the Englishman William Whittingham, who in the early 1550s praised the republic as the ‘mirror and model of true religion and true piety.’ Though Calvin and his wife Idelette de Bure had no children who survived infancy, the Genevan reformer became the spiritual father of countless numbers of students and pastors throughout Europe who looked to him for religious guidance and theological inspiration.

John Calvin’s ministry in Geneva was saturated in God’s Word. More than thirty sermons were preached each week in Geneva’s three urban churches, with three preaching services conducted on Sundays, and weekday sermons beginning as early as 4:00 a.m. (for servants and maids). As one of five or six ministers in the city, Calvin regularly preached twice on Sundays, and every day of the week on alternative weeks – totaling around 18–20 sermons each month. This sometimes involved very lengthy sermon series: between July 1556 and September 1559, for example, Calvin preached 343 sermons on Isaiah alone. In addition to these preaching services, Calvin and his colleagues also led a public Bible study (known as the *Congrégation*) intended for ministers, theological students, and interested lay persons every Friday morning. And, on top of it all, Calvin routinely delivered biblical lectures each week to theological students in the city and Academy. In time, many of these lectures were revised and published as full-length commentaries on Scripture. By the time of his death in 1564, Calvin had published commentaries on every book of the New Testament (except 2 and 3 John and Revelation), and roughly half of the Old Testament.

Clearly, interpreting and explaining God’s Word was central to Calvin’s vision of ministry. But why was this so? For the Genevan reformer, holy Scripture was the timeless, infallible voice of God speaking to His people. The proclamation of the Christian gospel, as announced

in Scripture and illumined through the Holy Spirit, was the power of God for salvation, capable of tenderizing and transforming even the hardest of human hearts. Scripture also provided an authoritative guide for living the Christian life as well as a spiritual weapon to vanquish Satan and his minions. Calvin vividly described the power of God's Word in a memorable passage from the *Institutes*:

Here, then, is the sovereign power with which the pastors of the church ... ought to be endowed. That is that they may dare boldly to do all things by God's Word; may compel all worldly power, glory, wisdom, and exaltation to yield to and obey his majesty; supported by his power, may command all from the highest even to the last; may build up Christ's household and cast down Satan's; may feed the sheep and drive away the wolves; may instruct and exhort the teachable; may accuse, rebuke, and subdue the rebellious and stubborn; may bind and loose; finally, if need be, may launch thunderbolts and lightnings; but do all things in God's Word.

Calvin's final years in Geneva were difficult ones, as he watched his beloved France descend into civil war and as he battled a variety of illnesses, including migraine headaches, kidney stones, gout, and tuberculosis. He preached his final sermon in early February 1564; thereafter he remained bedridden, corresponding with friends, seeing occasional visitors, praying and often groaning 'Lord, how long?' In his last will and testament, dated April 25, 1564, Calvin thanked God for rescuing him from the 'pit of idolatry' and for granting him salvation in 'the light of his gospel.' In this testament he also reaffirmed his unwavering commitment to his vocation as a gospel minister: 'I have sought, according to the measure of grace given to me, to teach his Word in all its purity, whether by sermons or in writings, and faithfully to expound Holy Scripture.' Calvin died a month later, on May 27, at the age of fifty-four. His colleague and friend Theodore Beza reported Calvin's death with this fitting tribute: '[A]t the very same

moment that day, the sun set and the greatest light that was in this world for the good of the church of God was taken away to heaven. We can truly say that in this one man God has been pleased to demonstrate to us in our day the way to live well and to die well.' To the very end of his life, Calvin remained a faithful minister of the gospel and instructor of the Word of God.

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This present devotional booklet offers a sample of the riches of John Calvin's interpretation of Scripture. The reader will find here choice selections from Calvin's commentaries, sermons, catechisms, prayers, and the *Institutes*, drawn from throughout his career as a pastor and reformer in Geneva. The majority of selections are drawn from Calvin's commentaries, as they appear in the nineteenth-century English translation provided by the Calvin Translation Society. The editor has taken the liberty to edit lightly these translations for clarity in accordance with modern usage. In addition, this devotional offers a number of selections from modern English editions of Calvin's *Institutes* (1536 and 1559) and his first *Catechism* (1538). Finally, the editor is responsible for the translations of Calvin's French prayers and sermons presented in this volume, based on *La forme des prières ecclésiastiques*, the *Calvini Opera* and the *Supplementa Calviniana*.

This devotional booklet has several features intended to enhance its use. First, the editor reproduces five prayers drawn from Calvin's liturgy, intended to be recited as the believer awakens in the morning, works during the day, dines at the table, and prepares to retire at night. Readers may want to incorporate these beautiful prayers into their devotional life from time to time. Second, given the variable dates of Easter, the editor has included seven undated devotions addressing Christ's passion and resurrection to be used during holy week. These Easter devotions are inserted between the readings for March 31 and April 1.

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