
Calvin's Influence on Mission

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Writing in 1982, Stanford Reid noted that in France 'there were only 5 organized churches in 1555 (in Paris, Meaux, Angers, Poitiers, and Loudon); nearly 100 four years later, at the time of the first National Synod in Paris in 1559; and 2,150 in 1562, the date of the beginning of the Wars of Religion.'¹ Menna Prestwich, a more recent writer, considers this last number to be an exaggeration, and that '1,750 would be more accurate'. She adds that 'modern estimates put the number of Calvinists in 1560 at around two million, 10 per cent of the population of France ... 50 per cent of the nobility is said to have been Calvinist in 1559.'² By any standard, the figures reflect phenomenal Gospel success.

In the early years of the Reformation the Gospel had taken root very slowly and sparsely in France, mainly through the writings of Martin Luther. Even the witness of native converts had produced minimal results. Persecution was fierce as the Roman Catholic authorities sought to suppress biblical teaching, and many paid for their faithful witness with their lives. The address of Nicholas Cop, recently appointed Rector of the Sorbonne University, Paris, delivered on 1 November 1533, included Lutheran sentiments and provoked a hostile response. A month later a royal letter requested the *Parlement* to bring 'the accursed Lutheran sect' to an end. In October 1534, the affair of the *Placards* further antagonised the Catholic authorities: a broadside attacking the Mass had been pasted on walls in many French towns, including Paris. Arrests and executions followed, and many fled the country, including Calvin, who fled to Basle. There he found amenable company, among them William Farel, Henry Bullinger and Nicholas Cop, and there he prepared the *Institutes* for publication. He was aware that the work needed to address two parallel issues: a systematic presentation of Protestant Faith, and a rebuttal of charges of rebellion. This latter was necessary on account of the Anabaptists, whose amorphous theology of the sacraments, particularly baptism, and subversive idealism in both Church and State threatened the unity of Protestantism in its most formative period.

The appearance of the *Institutes* in 1536 may justifiably be seen as Calvin's first effort in mission. In his bold 'Prefatory Address' of the work to the King of France he nailed his colours to the mast: 'I shall not fear to confess that here is contained almost the sum of that very doctrine which they shout must be punished by prison, exile, proscription, and fire, and be exterminated on land and sea.'³ Behind this vigorous presentation of the Faith lay convictions such as those expressed in his commentary on Isa. 49:21:

The Lord, who has no need of human aid, begets his children in an extraordinary manner, and by the astonishing power of his Spirit; and 'brings them up' wherever he thinks proper; and in the fulfilment of this prediction, the Lord supplied them with nurses contrary to the expectation of all, so that it is not without reason that the Church wonders how they were reared. When we read this prophecy we are reminded that we ought not to be distressed beyond measure, if at any time we see the Church resemble a 'bereaved' woman, and that we ought not to doubt that he can suddenly, or in a moment, raise up and restore her, though we perceive no means by which she can be restored.⁴

Whatever the difficulties, concern for the spread of God's kingdom needs to be matched by confidence in the power of God's grace.

Born 10 July 1509 at Noyon in Picardy, John Calvin was encouraged to become a lawyer because of the excellent financial prospects that profession held for its members. The 'Preface' to his Commentary on the Psalms gives an account of his coming to faith in Christ, with its consequences: 'To the study of law ... I endeavoured faithfully to apply myself ... 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, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.'⁵ Some words here are indicative of powerful influences: 'abyss', 'sudden', 'subdued'; 'inflamed'. They also explain the constraints upon Calvin for the rest of his life in the cause of propagating the Gospel. Mission for him was not an optional extra; it was an urgent passion, inextricably linked to the service of God. To achieve its objective Calvin believed in the sovereignty of God's grace and the initiative of God's Spirit.

Calvin's initial settlement at Geneva in the summer of 1536 provided an immediate challenge to his missionary zeal. The city was in the early pangs of Reformation, and for two years he struggled to establish the work on sound foundations. Calvin composed 'a short formulary of confession and discipline', and provided guidelines for worship that included Psalm-singing. The Psalms gave content to their faith and expression to their experience. Later Calvin was to write, 'we know by experience, that singing has great strength and vigour to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal.'⁶ A three-year exile in Strasbourg preceded his final settlement at Geneva in September 1541. Both his convictions and his experiences were enriched by the time spent away from the city, and he benefited from close fellowship with Martin Bucer.

By this time Calvin's first commentary had appeared, on Romans, and the thrust of his ministry was apparent. In his 1539 *Reply* to a letter written by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and people of Geneva, Calvin wrote: 'There are three things on which the safety of the Church is founded, viz., doctrine, discipline, and the sacraments.'⁷ An echo of this is his found in the terms of his return to Geneva: 'On my return from Strasbourg I made the Catechism in haste, for I would never have accepted the ministry unless they had sworn to these two points; namely, to uphold the Catechism and the discipline.'⁸ François Wendel highlights the importance of this insistence: 'the Catechism of 1542 played a very considerable part in the diffusion of Calvinism. It familiarized the faithful with a number of theological questions, and thereby contributed to the religious training of several generations of Protestant believers.'⁹

Guidelines for discipline came in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* issued in November, 1541. They included four ministries: pastors, teachers, elders, deacons; a Consistorial meeting of elders and deacons each Thursday; and a recommendation that a college should be instituted for instructing children to prepare them for the ministry as well as for the civil government.¹⁰ Although inauguration of this college did not take place until June 1559, Wendel estimates that the Geneva Academy was Calvin's 'crowning work'.¹¹ Meanwhile, as Wendel observes, 'to ensure the recruitment of pastors for Geneva, for the surrounding regions and even for France, courses of lectures in theology were instituted, which, moreover, Calvin was at first almost the only one to deliver.'¹² It is no surprise to read John Knox's famous epithet of Geneva as 'the most perfect School of Christ since the Apostles'.

It was to this school that Calvin urged young men of faith and promise to come to be equipped for life and ministry. As an example, here is Calvin's 1550 letter to William Rabot, a young French convert and law student at Padua facing the pressures of persecution and worldly allurements:

That nothing of this kind may happen to you, you must first of all give devoted submission to the will of the Lord, and in the next place, you must fortify yourself by his sacred doctrines. But as this is too extensive a theme to be embraced in a letter, it is better for you to draw from the fountain-head itself. For if you make a constant study of the word of the Lord, you will be quite able to guide your life to the highest excellence. You have faithful commentaries, which will furnish the best assistance. I wish very much you could find it convenient at some time to pay us a visit; for, I flatter myself, you would never regret the journey. Whatever you do, see that you follow the Lord, and at no time turn aside from the chief end.¹³

Coming to Geneva, however, was not to be an end in itself, but a means of equipping men for the arduous task of mission. This was the reason for Calvin's stay in Geneva, as he confesses in a letter to Henry Bullinger in May 1549: 'If I wished to regard my own life or private concerns, I should immediately betake myself elsewhere. But when I consider how very important this corner is for the propagation of the kingdom of Christ, I have good reason to be anxious that it should be carefully watched over.'¹⁴ A similar urgency permeates another letter, this time to the city dignitaries of Berne, in March 1555: 'I beg you to consider that hitherto God has made use of my instrumentality, and in all likelihood will continue to do so, that according to my slender capacity, I labor continually to combat the enemies of the faith, and lay myself out entirely to the best of my abilities to further the spread of the gospel. Thus may it please your excellencies like good Christian princes, whom the prophet Isaiah styles nursing-fathers of the church, to hold out to me a helping hand and support me against malignants and detractors, rather than suffer me to be aggrieved by them. But I ask of you no favor save on this condition, that you find in me a good and loyal servant of God.'¹⁵

There have been many who have either denied or neglected Calvin's influence on mission. Here is a typical quotation: 'He displayed no trace of missionary enthusiasm. Allowance, of course, must be made for his preoccupation with multifarious interests embracing Europe in their scope, and also for the practical impossibility, in that age, of instituting the necessary organization for the prosecution of missionary enterprise. But there is little in his writings to indicate that he felt the pressure of the foreign mission problem.'¹⁶ Hunter was thinking, primarily perhaps, of 'foreign missions', but the remark reflects his general assumption. By way of contrast, here is the conclusion of Philip E. Hughes:

Calvin's Geneva ... was not a theological ivory tower that lived to itself and for itself, oblivious of its responsibility in the gospel to the needs of others. Human vessels were equipped and refitted in this haven, not to be status symbols like painted yachts safely moored at a fashionable marina, but that they might launch out into the surrounding ocean of the world's need, bravely facing every storm and peril that awaited them in order to bring the light of Christ's gospel to those who were in the ignorance and darkness from which they themselves had originally come. They were taught in this school in order that they in turn might teach others the truth that had set them free.¹⁷

Another student of Calvin's life and work, H. Bergema, concludes that, 'when missions is first of all—proclamation of the kingship of Christ over all areas of life in a world

alienated from God and his Word, witnessing for Christ as the only and perfect Saviour and of his absolute sovereignty over the entire world, and the summons to all men to be converted to God and his Christ—*then the whole of Calvin's work has been mission work.*¹⁸

There is also the assumption that Calvinism, with its emphasis on the cerebral, both in personal experience of understanding the Christian faith, and in the practice of teaching it, has little to do with a heartfelt burden for mission. Nothing could be further from the truth, a fact borne out by Calvin's own spirituality. Calvin was 'a God-possessed soul', whose religion was 'reflected in his crest—a hand with a burning heart in it, and the words, "I give Thee all".'¹⁹ 'Calvin describes the whole Christian life as a bearing of the Cross', says Ronald S. Wallace, wherein we are 'laying ourselves out for God's service and proving to him our obedience.'²⁰ It was this incandescent zeal for realizing God's will by submission and confession that brought about the spread of the Gospel.

Blazing zeal, yes, but coupled with profound compassion, as is evident from his famous letter to the five prisoners of Lyons, 15 May, 1553:

Since it pleases him to employ you to the death in maintaining his quarrel, he will strengthen your hands in the fight, and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain. And though the fruit may not all at once appear, yet in time it shall spring up more abundantly than we can express. But as he hath vouchsafed you this privilege, that your bonds have been renowned, and that the noise of them has been everywhere spread abroad, it must needs be, in despite of Satan, that your death should resound far more powerfully, so that the name of our Lord be magnified thereby. For my part, I have no doubt, if it please this kind Father to take you unto himself, that he has preserved you hitherto, in order that your long-continued imprisonment might serve as a preparation for the better awakening of those whom he has determined to edify by your end. For let enemies do their utmost, they never shall be able to bury out of sight that light which God has made to shine in you, in order to be contemplated from afar.²¹

Writing to the church at Montelimar, he urges the same compassion in the face of opposition: 'Whenever you see the enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ rise up passionately against you, try to win them in humility and modesty.'²² And in another place, he issues a similar challenge: 'All the help we want is given to us to endure wrongs with patience, but in such a way that we abandon all desire for vengeance and endeavour to win over our adversaries with earnest reproofs, so that they are forced to admire our patience that they take the opportunity to turn to God. For what is to be the aim and the goal of our patience, if not to win their impoverished souls?'²³ Calvin had a heart for God, and therefore a passion for the precious souls of men.

Rejection of Calvin's influence on mission also stems from the popular fallacy that Calvinism by definition renders evangelism redundant. The argument runs something like this: election guarantees salvation to the elect, therefore they will be saved irrespective of means, and those not elected will never be saved whatever diligence accompanies means. The answer to this lies in the conviction that God uses means to bring about His ends: in particular, Gospel preaching made effective by the authority of the Holy Spirit. Take, first, these statements from his *Institutes*:

Faith needs the Word as much as fruit needs the living root of a tree ... unless the power of God, by which he can do all things, confronts our eyes, our ears will barely receive the Word or not esteem it at its true value. [III.2.31]

This bare and external proof of the Word of God should have been amply sufficient to

engender faith, did not our blindness and perversity prevent it. ... Accordingly, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing. From this, also, it is clear that faith is much higher than human understanding. And it will not be enough for the mind to be illumined by the Spirit of God unless the heart is also strengthened and supported by his power. [III.2.33]

Therefore, as we cannot come to Christ unless we be drawn by the Spirit of God, so when we are drawn we are lifted up in mind and heart above our understanding. For the soul, illumined by him, takes on a new keenness, as it were, to contemplate the heavenly mysteries, whose splendour had previously blinded it. And man's understanding, thus beamed by the light of the Holy Spirit, then at last truly begins to taste those things which belong to the Kingdom of God, having been formerly quite foolish and dull in tasting them. [III.2.35]

God breathes faith into us only by the instrument of his gospel, as Paul points out that 'faith comes from hearing' [Rom.10:17]. Likewise, the power to save rests with God [Romans 1:16]; but (as Paul again testifies) he displays and unfolds it in the preaching of the gospel. [IV.1.5]

Secondly, consider two passages from his Commentaries on significant texts:

'Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?, says the Lord God, and not that he should return from his ways and live' ... God desires nothing more earnestly than that those who were perishing and rushing to destruction should return into the way of safety. And for this reason not only is the Gospel spread abroad in the world, but God wished to bear witness through all ages how inclined he is to pity ... In the Gospel we hear how familiarly he addresses us when he promises us pardon. And this is the knowledge of salvation, to embrace his mercy which he offers us in Christ. It follows, then, that what the Prophet now says is very true, that God wills not the death of a sinner, because he meets him of his own accord, and is not only prepared to receive all who fly to his pity, but he calls them towards him with a loud voice, when he sees how they are alienated from all hope of safety ... We hold, then, that God wills not the death of a sinner when he calls all equally to repentance, and promises himself prepared to receive them if they only seriously repent. If any one should object—then there is no election of God, by which he has predestinated a fixed number to salvation, the answer is ready, that God always wishes the same thing, though by different ways, and in a manner inscrutable to us. Although, therefore, God's will is simple, yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned.²⁴

'God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' ... God has at heart the salvation of all because he invites all to the acknowledgement of his truth. This belongs to that kind of argument in which the cause is proved from the effect; for, if 'the gospel is the power of God for salvation to every one that believeth', (Rom. 1:16,) it is certain that all those to whom the gospel is addressed are invited to the hope of eternal life ... Hence we see the childish folly of those who represent this passage to be opposed to predestination. 'If God', say they, 'wishes all men indiscriminately to be saved, it is false that some are predestinated by his eternal purpose to salvation, and others to perdition' ... the Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception. Now the preaching of the gospel gives life; and hence he justly concludes that God invites all equally to partake salvation. But the present discourse relates to classes of men, and not to individual persons; for his sole object is, to include in this

number princes and foreign nations. That God wishes the doctrine of salvation to be enjoyed by them as well as others, is evident from the passages already quoted, and from other passages of a similar nature ... Now the duty arising: out of that love which we owe to our neighbour is, to be solicitous and to do our endeavour for the salvation of all whom God includes in his calling, and to testify this by godly prayers.²⁵

A sentence from one of Calvin's letters, to believers at Poitou, summarises his aim: 'Let each one strive to attract and win over to Jesus Christ, those whom he can, and let those whom a careful examination shall have proved worthy of it, be received with the consent of all.'²⁶ Clearly, Calvin did not teach his followers complacency and inaction in the matter of mission.

Calvin's prayers for the power of the Holy Spirit went hand in hand with the primacy he gave to preaching the Gospel to the lost. Hence his exhortation based on Paul's prayer for the Ephesians:

His prayers for them are mentioned, not only to testify his regard for them, but likewise to excite them to pray in the same manner; for the seed of the word is scattered in vain, unless the Lord render it fruitful by his blessing. Let pastors learn from Paul's example, not only to admonish and exhort their people, but to entreat the Lord to bless their labours, that they may not be unfruitful. Nothing will be gained by their industry and toil,—all their study and application will be to no purpose, except so far as the Lord bestows his blessing. This ought not to be regarded by them as an encouragement to sloth. It is their duty, on the contrary, to labour earnestly in sowing and watering, provided they, at the same time, ask and expect the increase from the Lord.²⁷

It followed, therefore, that God's kingdom would be extended using God's means and pleading God's promises, a passage from Isaiah providing sufficient precedent:

The restoration of the Church proceeds solely from the grace of God, who can remove its barrenness as soon as he has imparted strength from heaven; for he who created all things out of nothing, as if they had formerly existed, is able to renew it in a moment ... We are renewed as soon as the Lord has sent down the Spirit from heaven, that we who were 'wilderness' may be cultivated and fertile fields. Ere the Spirit of God has breathed into us, we are justly compared to wildernesses or dry soil; for we produce nothing but 'thorns and briars', and are by nature unfit for yielding fruits. Accordingly, they who were barren and unfruitful, when they have been renewed by the Spirit of God, begin to yield plentiful fruits ... Whenever, therefore, the Church is afflicted, and when her condition appears to be desperate, let us raise our eyes to heaven, and depend fully on these promises.²⁸

Calvin strenuously insisted on the need for the Spirit's activity to accompany the Word preached in order that the soul should be illumined, convicted, and converted to God. Mission is effective only when the truth penetrates the heart as well as the head.

That truth, given fervent and lucid expression in Calvin's printed works, was spreading throughout France.

Calvin's works were known in France from at least the early 1540s. The *Institutes* seems to have been in circulation among French intellectuals within a short time of publication of the first French edition in 1541, and the following year the book was specifically singled out for condemnation in a proclamation against heretical works. The first comprehensive index of forbidden books was largely made up of Genevan imprints, including no fewer than nine of Calvin's writings. That, these prohibitions notwithstanding, his works continued to be read is evident from the [1551] Edict of Châteaubriand, Henry II's

persecuting edict which rationalized and systematized previous legislation against evangelicals. The edict repeatedly singled out Geneva as a notorious centre of heresy, and forbade any contact with it.²⁹

The Sorbonne drew up twenty-six articles setting out the true Catholic Faith in reply to the *Institutes*, and they were ratified by a royal Ordinance in July 1543. It was a time when 'religious meetings were held by night or in cellars; doctrines were spread by secret house-to-house teaching, or by treatises concealed among the wares of pretended pedlars ... Moreover, the influence of the exiles reacted on their old homes. From Geneva and other Swiss centers of Protestantism missionaries came to evangelise France.'³⁰

Pedlars and colporteurs, fired by Calvin's example as much as by his teaching, travelled widely throughout France. The Gospel was to be shared with everyone, prince and peasant, in urban centres and provincial towns, to people at work or leisure, on weekdays as well as Sundays. Émile G. Léonard graphically records their labours in this way:

The work of transporting books from abroad (especially from Geneva) and of circulating them in France was undertaken by the colporteurs, who formed the majority of those propagandists whose number and importance has often been exaggerated. They included professional pedlars, who were not always indifferent to the profit attached to a merchandise which commanded high prices, but soon came under the influence of their wares and went to their death singing psalms ... Militant zealots like 'Guillaume Husson, an apothecary, who fled from Blois for the Word of God', and promptly went off to the *Parlement* of Rouen 'to disseminate certain little books containing teaching on the Christian religion and on the abuses of human traditions'; printers, readers and booksellers, including Philibert Hamelin of Touraine, who won the peninsula of Arvert for the Reformation. A publisher in Geneva, Hamelin transported his books to France and sold them up and down the country. Following his mules on foot, he took advantage of the opportunity to evangelise at the roadside: 'Many believers have told how, as he went through the countryside, he would often watch for the hour when the men in the fields took their meal, sitting under a tree or in the shade of a hedge, as is their wont. And there, pretending to rest alongside them, he would take the opportunity, by simple and gradual means, to teach them to fear God and to pray to him before and after their meals, inasmuch as it was He who gave them all things for the love of His Son Jesus Christ. Whereupon he would ask the poor peasants if they would not like him to pray to God for them. Some were greatly comforted and edified by this, others were astounded as hearing unfamiliar things; some molested him, because he showed them that they were on the path to damnation if they did not believe in the Gospel.'³¹

An underground network seems to have existed between Geneva and French soil, to facilitate travel and safety. Where groups of believers existed, they, too, had to be cautious and prudent in gathering together. Over them all, it is clear, Calvin's shadow, if not an awareness of his concern and prayers, was an ever-present reality, urging them to personal constancy and public witness.

When Calvin heard of an isolated Christian or even of an isolated group trying to gather by themselves, he was there on the doorstep, as it were, with a messenger and a letter, seeking to make them feel they were part of a far larger group in touch with the universal church which was praying for them, and had a word for them, and was seeking to support them in every practical way. Each small group that appeared, he regarded as the nucleus of a congregation which must be made to grow and define itself in to receive as a pastor one of the numbers he had trained for the purpose of such leadership under the Word of God.

When he sent his man to them, he asked them to see the pastor as one to be listened to for the sake of Christ, and respected as representing Christ in their midst, the good Shepherd. Within each congregation he sought to develop a cellular structure in which under wise and trained leadership each individual would give the other support, enlightenment and encouragement and in which those who tended to falter would be held to the faith and the standard by the expectations, example, and encouragement of the others and if need be by the discipline exercised by them. Congregations too had to be organized in groups sharing a common concern for each other and a common discipline.³²

A delicate situation required secrecy; and also the city could be held responsible for what might be thought by the civil authorities of France as subversion.

Given such constraints, and aware of Calvin's eagerness to help, pastors were often requested by local, emerging congregations. A typical response by Calvin is found in this letter sent in 1553 to 'a gentleman of Jersey' in the Channel Islands:

We praise God for having inclined your heart to try if it will be possible to erect, by your means, a small church on the place where you reside. And indeed according as the agents of the Devil strive by every act of violence to abolish the true religion, extinguish the doctrine of salvation, and exterminate the name of Jesus Christ, it is very just that we should labour on our side to further the progress of the gospel, that, by these means, God may be served in purity, and the poor wandering sheep may be put under the protection of the sovereign Pastor to whom every one should be subject. And you know that it is a sacrifice well pleasing to God, to advance the spread of the Gospel by which we are enlightened in the way of salvation, to dedicate our life to the honour of him who has ransomed us at so costly a price in order to bear rule in the midst of us. Therefore we pray you to take courage, as we supplicate at the same time the Father of all virtue to confirm you in your holy purpose. Meanwhile, because we have heard that you desire to be assisted by us, and to have a man proper for the work of edification, we have not wished to be wanting to our duty. We present to you then our brother [name with-held because of the danger of the letter falling into the wrong hands], the bearer of this letter, who has shown us by deeds by what zeal he was animated. He has had such a conversation among us that we doubt not but that his life will be an excellent example. His doctrine is pure, and as far as we can judge, those who will content themselves with being taught by him in simplicity, and will show themselves docile, will be able to profit by his preaching.³³

By this time, requests for ministers multiplied, and the demand exceeded all possibility of supply. It was a time of widespread spiritual harvest in France.

Mission includes consolidation as well as expansion, and Calvin consistently advocated the adoption of his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* to emerging congregations. Menna Prestwich sees the establishment of a regular worshipping congregation at Paris as pivotal in the development of a French Reformed Church:

In 1555 the Calvinist church in Paris was founded, giving an internal focal point distinct from the international Calvinist capital at Geneva... The years from around 1555 to 1562 saw an explosion of Calvinist conversions. The foundation of the Paris church set the tone for a mood of defiance, almost of triumph, and the will to resist replaced the cult of martyrdom. In May 1558 Jean Macar, a minister of the Paris church, wrote to Calvin that 'the fire is lit in all parts of the kingdom and all the water in the sea will not suffice to quench it.' Shortly afterwards, Calvinist demonstrators occupied ... the left bank of the Seine, much frequented by Parisians for evening strolling, and for six nights three to four thousand of the faithful paraded and sang psalms.³⁴

Evidently, it was not only an explosion of numbers, but also of confidence, and of urgent need. Conversions had to be monitored and nurtured. Mission and ministry are complementary.

Something of that urgency comes across in the records preserved of the movements of pastors at the time.

During the period between 1555 and 1562, the *Register of the Company of Pastors* mentions by name 88 men who were sent out from Geneva to different places as bearers of the gospel. In actual fact these represent no more than a fraction of the missions that were undertaken. The incompleteness of the *Register* may be gauged, by way of example, from the consideration that in 1561, which appears to have been the peak year for missionary activity, the dispatch of only twelve men is recorded, whereas evidence from other sources indicates that in that year alone nearly twelve times as many—no less than 142—ventured forth on their respective missions. For a church, itself struggling, in a small city-republic, this figure indicates a truly amazing missionary zeal and virility, and a fine unconcern for its own frequently pressing needs.³⁵

The same *Register* gives details of such appointments:

On 22 June 1556 Jean Vignaulx was elected to be sent to the brethren of Piedmont, who had requested that one or two more ministers should be provided because of the size of the flock which, by the grace of God, was growing daily.

On Friday 27 November, since a letter had been received from the brethren in Piedmont requesting that more workers should be sent because the harvest was increasing, the ministers of this church chose and sent one named M. Albert [blank], of Albigeois.

[June-July 1557] At the beginning of June M. Guy Moranges, otherwise called Monsieur de la Garde, left for Anduze to serve as pastor to the inhabitants of that region who had the knowledge of God and who are said to be very numerous. At the end of two months, however, it became necessary for him to return with the consent of the elders there, both because of his illness and also because of the severe persecution which had broken out.

[1561] M. d'Anduze was lent to the church of Lyon for some time following a request for the help of one of the ministers of Geneva in their need, since by reason of the multitude of persons daily joining the church, they had an inadequate number of ministers.³⁶

Such entries convey an impression, not only of eagerness to help, but of deliberate policy to disperse trained pastors as widely and efficiently as possible in the cause of Christ.

Calvin's only known attempt at a foreign mission took place in 1557, when two men were sent to Brazil as chaplains to a group of Protestant emigrants. When the church at Geneva received this request it 'at once gave thanks to God for the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ in a country so distant and likewise so foreign and among a nation so entirely without the knowledge of the true God.'³⁷ Thus, from the outset the enterprise was seen as missionary in its character, but the task proved impossible. The emigrants found the natives barbaric in the extreme, ignorant of God, servile to evil spirits and sorcerers. Time was not on their side and the language barrier proved insuperable. Doctrinal disputes arose, the Governor reverted to Catholicism, and persecution followed. It had proved an abortive attempt.

The following document provides a vivid, contemporary account of the typical circumstances that faced Genevan pastors nearer home. It is part of a long letter sent from 'a minister in Normandy' to Calvin, dated August 1561:

I have no doubt that some report will have reached your ears of what occurred at the Guibray fair which began on 15 August ... it seems to me that there is nothing to compare with this fair, not only in Normandy but in the whole of France. People come from all over, even from abroad ... the crowd who wanted to hear the sermon was more than two or three thousand persons ... The sermon was conducted in a seemly silence and with a psalm at the beginning and at the end. The following day the rumour spread through the whole camp that a sermon had taken place, and everyone wanted to find out about it, asking after the place and the hour. But we had no wish to tell them, fearing an ambush ... The priests had complained greatly, because of the preaching and because they had been quite openly selling books from Geneva and because boys had been hawking through the streets with loud cries broadsheets denouncing the mass ... On Sunday morning a huge number of people gathered together at five o'clock in the morning. The meeting place was changed to a place out in the open country, which was felt to be better so that any enemies could be seen from whatever direction they came. There was not the same silence as on previous days, yet everything passed off in a most edifying way, and after the preaching everyone went off peacefully ... our people assembled at five that same evening ... I believe that something more than five or six thousand people were present. I was in a considerable doubt what text to take for my sermon, but my mind was suddenly made up to speak about the Communion ... I spoke as gently as I could so as not to give offence to anyone, attributing to Christ alone all authority. But very suddenly a disturbance arose, so that everyone sprang up, clutching their swords, and crying, 'What is it, what is it?' For my part, I did not move from my place (thanks be to God for giving me courage). But I did not have the wit to remove my beret, which I was wearing to distinguish me from the rest. Then I called out, 'My friends, it is nothing', and this cry was soon on everyone's lips. Daggers and swords were put back in their sheaths. Many said to me, 'Fear not, monsieur, if you die, we die with you.' And suddenly the tumult passed ... silence having been restored, I exhorted the people to listen to the words of the Gospel, and said that it was Satan who had caused this disturbance to prevent the coming of Christ's kingdom. Then I returned to my theme without (thank God) further trouble, and continued to the end, showing the difference between the Communion of Christ and the priestly mass ... This same day after supper, between nine and ten o'clock, the stall holders were sitting around singing psalms with great gusto. And a number of makers of rosary beads from Paris called them ... rebels, and mocked them by singing bawdy songs. They were told either to shut up or join in singing the Lord's praises. And since they took no notice, a fracas arose, and voices were heard crying 'Rouen, Rouen' [a rallying cry], and a great crowd of two or three hundred found themselves at sword-point, and the cry went up, 'Long live the Gospel!' The rosary-sellers took fright, and started shouting 'Long live the Gospel!' with the rest. And the crowd moved through the camp, reforming all the singing and dissolutions they came across. That done, they put up candles at the junctions of the main roads and knelt down to pray before they went to bed, and this practice was continued until the end of the fair ... On the Tuesday, when I was about to leave, I was told of an issue that was causing some disquiet among the people. Many were saying, 'what shall we do now? We can no longer go to mass: how do we live now?' I remained there this day also, and important people, principally the local nobility, began to arrive. For it is the custom that the signeurs come with their ladies for the last days when the merchants have done their deals. In my sermon on this day I took as my text Colossians 2: when you have received Christ, follow him. And I gave many suggestions what each should do while they were waiting for the Gospel to be preached in public. How each might teach his family, read scriptures, reform his life, pray for the King and the princes, that God might bring them to an understanding of his Holy

Gospel. Also that each should attempt to join themselves to our secret assemblies. I took this opportunity to talk of our meetings and what was done in them, and answer the calumnies spoken about us... I spoke briefly of the articles of faith, and how ours is not a new faith but that of our forefathers, like the prophets and all those who have known the Gospel. Briefly, I enumerated the commandments one by one, denouncing vices, particularly idolatry, blasphemy and other most common faults.³⁸

The enormity of the task did not daunt or discourage men of Genevan calibre. There was an over-riding consideration: the glory of God in the salvation of souls.

By the time of Calvin's death in 1564 his labours for the propagation of the Gospel had borne abundant fruit in many lands, in none so more than in his native France. In his moving farewell to the pastors at Geneva he confessed:

I have had many infirmities which you have been obliged to bear with, and what is more, all I have done has been worth nothing. The ungodly will greedily seize upon this word, but I say it again that all I have done has been worth nothing, and that I am a miserable creature. But certainly I can say this, that I have willed what is good, that my vices have always displeased me, and that the root of the fear of God has been in my heart; and you may say that the disposition was good; and I pray you, that the evil be forgiven me, and if there was any good, that you conform yourselves to it and make it an example.³⁹

And in a letter to his colleague, William Farel, he added: 'I draw my breath with difficulty and expect each moment to breathe my last. It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is to all his followers a gain both in life and in death.'⁴⁰

Those who bear his name from a conviction of the biblical integrity of his message, share the intensity of his commitment to Christ. It is for this reason that Calvinism is inherently evangelistic: doctrine and mission, knowledge and zeal, preaching and power combine harmoniously together. It honours God's means while it seeks God's ends. It trusts God's providence whatever the circumstances, and sees adversity as opportunity. It is a way of life that uses the Day of Grace for the purposes of grace, because it flows from a heart ablaze with a vision of God's majesty. It is permeated by gratitude and godly fear that are the result of submission to a personal salvation bestowed and the divine glory desired. To recognize this missionary instinct is to acknowledge John Calvin's influence on mission.

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