

CALVIN'S PREACHING

A Research Paper

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by

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*I affirm the honor code.

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This paper will examine the theology and practice of preaching in the ministry of John Calvin. Calvin believed that preaching must be laser-focused on explaining the Word of God, and that the Holy Spirit is the worker by whom all real fruit from preaching is brought about. These convictions influenced his whole ministry, and his own sermons will be analyzed in light of them.

But first, a brief biographical sketch will be given. This will include basic contextual information and will highlight important factors for situating his ministry in history; appended to this, a brief consideration will be given of Calvin's significance and why his ministry is worth examining.

Second, the theology and practice of his preaching will each be considered in turn. Answers to the following questions will be given. What did Calvin believe happens when the Word of God is preached? Both for the preacher, and for the hearer. How did his theology of the Holy Spirit impact his theology of preaching? What did he believe to be the proper role of the Word in the regular life of the church? What did Calvin consider as chief aims and best practices in exposition and preaching? What were Calvin's own sermons like?

Third and finally, reflections and applications from Calvin's ministry will be put forward, particularly for preachers. The material used to inform each of these sections includes Calvin's sermons, commentaries, and theological works. It also includes modern works analyzing Calvin's ministry. Sources can be seen in the bibliography below, and necessary footnotes will be provided throughout.

Calvin In History¹

John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509 in northern France. From a young age his intelligence was recognized and he was given the opportunity to receive a good education. Young Calvin completed an arts degree at the University of Paris and began studying law (according to his father's bidding, who initially wanted John to be a priest) first at Orleans, then at Bourges. He began picking up humanist tendencies, studying Greek and possibly Hebrew, and reading classic works. Reformation ideas began making inroads into France, and Calvin was affected. In a tumultuous time of political and religious turmoil, during which Calvin became convinced of said Reformation ideas, he wrote a small book called *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he completed in 1535. He was moving often among the network of Protestants throughout Europe, often taking pains to avoid Roman Catholic forces, when he "detoured through the small independent city-state of Geneva in July 1536."² This detour led to a decades-long ministry in Geneva (with a brief break due to being exiled by the Genevan authorities, who later invited him back). His ministry there would shake the world.

What is it about John Calvin?

Calvin is one of the greatest theologians who ever lived. In the eyes of Karl Barth, John Calvin was comparable to a force of nature.

Calvin is a cataract, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something directly down from Himalaya, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological. I lack completely the means, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, not to speak of presenting it adequately. What I receive is only a thin little stream, and what I can give out again is only a yet thinner extract of this little stream. I could gladly and profitably set myself down and spend the rest of my life with just Calvin.³

¹ Elsie Anne McKee ed. *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 6-19. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), 3-19.

² McKee ed. *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 9.

³ Karl Barth, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 101, quoted in McDermott, Gerald R. *The Great Theologians: A Brief Guide*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 96.

Professor John Murray of Westminster Theological Seminary warmly commended the work of Calvin and the reverence with which he handled the Word of God. Murray said Calvin is “*the exegete of the reformation and in the first rank of biblical exegetes of all time*”⁴ (emphasis added). He added the following fiery remark:

May I be permitted to say, and say it with emphasis, that the Reformed expositor who is not in the habit of perusing Calvin’s commentaries or, in any case, is not imbued with the principles of interpretation they exemplify, is not worthy of his own claims and profession as an heir of the Reformation of the sixteenth century.⁵

And for many, his worth will most incontrovertibly be proven by the esteem which the Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon, had for Calvin. “It would not be possible for me too earnestly to press upon you the importance of reading the expositions of that prince among men, JOHN CALVIN!”⁶

His preaching and theology of preaching in particular, are quite worthy of study.⁷ Great preaching in an expository, *lectio continua* manner, is characteristic of practically all the reformers. But in Calvin there is a remarkable depth as to the *why* of preaching, and in the usefulness of the finished product. From Calvin, I contend, the Christian preacher can find more coal to stoke the fire of his heart with regard to the work of the Word and Spirit and the glory of preaching than in any other uninspired theological source. Plus, Calvin is not shabby in his own sermons, although some have questioned their value.⁸ Calvin as preacher is an exemplar of the reverence for the Word of God and the high view of preaching he espoused.

⁴ John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray, vol. 1*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 308.

⁵ Murray, *Collect Writings, vol. 1*, 310-11.

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 556.

⁷ “The thoroughness and completeness, the systematic nature, of his expository preaching is truly remarkable.” Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, vol. 4: The Age of the Reformation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 91.

⁸ Calvin made a point to keep things plain, unembellished, and direct in his preaching. He avoided pomposity in the pulpit, and some call his sermons simplistic and unvaluable in comparison to the piercing depth and systematic clarity of his commentaries and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. For some sources of such critiques, for counterarguments, and for helpful thoughts on the value of reading his printed sermons see the introduction to John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust,

Calvin's Theology of Preaching

Now, what did Calvin believe was happening when the Word of God was preached on the Lord's Day? Calvin believed that the message of life, which was the power of God unto salvation, was being heralded. He believed that the enduring, authoritative Word of God was being given a place to shine its light and spread its heat. When done rightly, none of the hard edges of the text would be removed, though the pastor would accommodate his method of speech and force of application according to the needs and limitations of his flock. But the source of preaching as the exposition, or bringing out, of the meaning of the text of Holy Scripture, which is the Word of God, is the first building block in Calvin's theology of preaching, and it cannot be overlooked. Calvin's preaching was theologically driven. "It is clear that single-minded concentration on the Holy Scriptures could come only from a particular view of the Bible. No one would spend so much time on a book to which he did not attach an extraordinary significance."⁹ Calvin knew that the words on the page of the Bible are words from God, so he knew he was obligated to receive them with reverence; and as a preacher, that he was obligated to devote himself to their study. Calvin plainly states his view of Scripture in his comments on 2 Timothy 3:16-17,

In order to uphold the authority of the Scripture, he [Paul] declares that *it is divinely inspired*; for, if it be so, it is beyond all controversy that men ought to receive it with reverence. This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Although Calvin would not credit the same type of authority to preaching as he would to the inspired text of Scripture, he believed that it is God who speaks through men when faithful

2017). Also the introduction to John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997).

⁹ T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 1.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Timothy*, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43/calcom43.iv.iv.iii.html>.

preaching is done. Here there is rock-solid truth and great encouragement for preachers who feel their littleness, as Calvin wrote,

Those who think that the authority of the doctrine is impaired by the insignificance of the men who are called to teach, betray their ingratitude; for among the many noble endowments with which God has adorned the human race, one of the most remarkable is, that he deigns to consecrate the mouths and tongues of men to his service, making his own voice to be heard in them.¹¹

So, it is the voice of the Father which is heard in the faithful preaching of the Word, according to Calvin, regardless of how insignificant the vessel. God is present when the Gospel is preached, when “the heavenly doctrine” is declared, when the Scriptures are expounded. Moreover, Calvin believed it is of incredible importance for a pastor to have a life that can stand as an example of holiness. The preacher should be the first practitioner of the truth he proclaims, though Calvin recognized, “If we preach only with our lips but if our life fails to match, God’s truth is no less valid nor is his authority diminished.”¹² So the abiding power is in God. His authority comes through in the Scriptures; “where preaching is, there God’s voice ringeth in our ears.”¹³

Calvin believed that Christ is spiritually present in the Lord’s Supper, and that Christ is spiritually present in preaching. The Son of God appeals (and appears) to men in the preaching of the gospel, to be received by faith. Calvin argues that many people essentially seek for signs. They want to see Jesus Christ appear to them and beckon them to believe. They want to touch

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 4.1.5. And, “We see that God, who might perfect his people in a moment, chooses not to bring them to manhood in any other way than by the education of the Church. We see the mode of doing it expressed; the preaching of celestial doctrine is committed to pastors... it pleased him in ancient times that sacred meetings should be held in the sanctuary, that consent in faith might be nourished by doctrine proceeding from the lips of the priest. Those magnificent titles, as when the temple is called God’s rest, his sanctuary, his habitation, and when he is said to dwell between the cherubims, are used for no other purpose than to procure love, reverence, and dignity to the ministry of heavenly doctrine, to which otherwise the appearance of an insignificant human being might be in no slight degree derogatory. Therefore, to teach us that the treasure offered to us in earthen vessels is of inestimable value, God himself appears and, as the author of this ordinance, requires his presence to be recognized in his own institution.”

¹² John Calvin,

¹³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1206, quoted in Ralph Cunningham, *Preaching with Spiritual Power: Calvin’s Understanding of Word and Spirit in Preaching*, (Fearn, Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2015), 83.

the holes in his hands and side. Calvin tells them that Jesus Christ is present, and can be received by faith, in the preaching of the gospel. “For when the gospel is preached to us, our Lord Jesus is there, declaring that he has not forsaken us. Though he does not dwell with us in a physical sense, yet [spiritually] we are united to him.”¹⁴ Calvin believed that Christ very closely identifies with the ministers of his Word. When the congregation hears the word preached, they should consider that they are hearing their Lord Jesus Christ addressing them, as it were, through the lips of another man.¹⁵

And, as it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures, so it is the Holy Spirit who attends the Scriptures when they are preached, heard, or read. And, in order for preaching to be efficacious to the hearer for their conversion or sanctification, the Holy Spirit must work actively in his or her heart along with the Word. Chiefly, it is by working regeneration in our hearts and by upholding us in faith that the Holy Spirit makes the Word efficacious for us. And, the Holy Spirit never does this work apart from the Word.¹⁶ The Word may be seen as the instrumental cause, the tool through which regeneration is wrought. The sovereign Holy Spirit has to be seen as the efficient cause, the operator whose hand accomplishes the act via the instrumental cause. So the Word in itself is always good, but it becomes good to us, and achieves its ultimate beneficial end in us, only with the work of the Spirit. And where the Holy Spirit works by the Word in a saving way, there faith is wrought. Thus, there is no room in Calvin’s mind for talking about the Word being helpful to us apart from faith. Calvin’s words on Hebrews 4:12 are worth quoting at length here,

But we must here observe the connection between the word and faith. It is such that faith is not to be separated from the word, and that *the word separated from faith can confer no good*; not indeed that the efficacy or power of the word depends on us; for were the whole world false, he who cannot lie would still never cease to be true, but the word never puts forth its power in us except when faith gives it an entrance. It is indeed the power of God unto salvation, but only to those who believe. ([Romans 1:16](#).) There is in it revealed the

¹⁴ Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 15.

¹⁵ Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*, 83-84.

¹⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 125-126.

righteousness of God, but it is from faith to faith. *Thus it is that the word of God is always efficacious and saving to men, when viewed in itself or in its own nature; but no fruit will be found except by those who believe.*¹⁷

The work of the Holy Spirit in attending the Word is a point which Calvin is known for. Debate has cropped up surrounding the details of Calvin's theology of Word and Spirit, and I have been convinced and helped by Ralph Cunnington's work, which seems to give a full and accurate treatment of Calvin's understanding of Word and Spirit in preaching.¹⁸ Cunnington is conversant with alternative views, and I will not address those views here. The Holy Spirit *always* accompanies the Word. The two are to be distinguished, since they are not the same, but they always go together and are not to be separated. Calvin believed that the power of the Word is given by the Holy Spirit,¹⁹ and that it is vain to search for the Holy Spirit in any place but the Word. The two are inseparable. Calvin dealt with the radical Reformers in his day, who separated the Word from the Spirit. And he did not mince words with them, "Calvin condemned them for confusing the Spirit of God with the spirit of Satan, since it is only the latter that is separated from the Word."²⁰ This means that Calvin believed a person commits great error if they look for revelation apart from what is written.

In Calvin's view, there is never a time when the Word of God is left without the Spirit of God. So also there is never a time when the preacher who expositors the text is left without the Spirit while he is preaching. It is not the minister's strength that converts the hearer, convicts the sinner, or encourages the believer; it is the strength of the Word of God and the strength of the Spirit who carries it. It is important to note that Calvin did not think the Word would *always* save. He believed that the Spirit was always with the Word, but not always for the purpose of saving the hearer. When the Word is preached the Spirit may bless or withhold blessing, but He

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews*, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom44/calcom44.x.i.html> (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*.

¹⁹ Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*, 89.

²⁰ Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*, 93.

is always present. He is either present for the purpose of blessing or for the purpose of judgment.²¹

Some people may believe that the Spirit, at times, might bring a person to regeneration and saving faith apart from the Word. Calvin would deny this. Even when someone has had very little exposure to Scripture, if they have had *some* knowledge of the promises of God in Christ, then the Spirit might work in their hearts “through stimulating prior knowledge of the Word.”²² According to Calvin, no one is ever regenerated apart from the presence of the Word.

With these high convictions about the Word of God and the inseparability of the Word and Spirit, Calvin believed the Word should have a central role in the life of the church. Calvin viewed the ministry of the Word as something that bears eternal significance, and a work which God has prescribed for his shepherds to perform. There is great joy and rest in Calvin’s theology of preaching, and it ought to flow into a vibrant church life. Calvin and other reformers “viewed the proclamation of the Word of God as the minister’s primary duty and restructured parish life in view of this priority.”²³ Over the course of Calvin’s life, he preached roughly four thousand sermons. Though he is known in history as a systematic theologian, he considered his preaching to be the most important work he undertook.²⁴

Calvin’s Own Sermons

Calvin’s sermons were meant to be heard, and that by the average person. He preached in the vernacular and avoided appearances of being a mere rhetorician. His goal was the most effective communication of the clear truth of Scripture to the people before him in his audience. He could be quite forceful and blunt in his exhortations, desiring the people to be ready and

²¹ Cunningham, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*, 100-102 and 108-110.

²² Cunningham, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*, 103-104.

²³ Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care in the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 148.

²⁴ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Preaching*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 113.

willing to submit to whatever came to them from the text of Scripture. He believed that his heart ought to be set on the spiritual edification of his hearers, and that he himself must be the first to apply the text of Scripture to his life.

His sermons normally have a simple structure. They begin with an introduction showing the usefulness of the text and its relevance. He proceeds to exposition, verse by verse, and weaves application throughout, often being heavier on application toward the end. The work of God in Christ is a chief theme in his expositions. In his sermons, he sometimes lacks the systematic carefulness that some might expect, knowing him as the theologian. He would preach the main point of the passage before him, and would not labor too much to make it square with other aspects of Bible truth; he was not careless, however.

There is also warmth in Calvin's sermons. In his preaching on the subject of election, he is incredibly pastoral. He encourages the believer not to stress too much about wondering whether they are elect or not, but to turn their eyes to the hope of the Gospel, realizing that they can know they are elect quite simply because God bears witness to the fact of their election by calling them to himself through the knowledge of the gospel and faith.²⁵ Calvin's sermons are quite hope-filled.

In addition, however, *reproof* is a significant theme in Calvin's sermons. He is careful to point out to the people that, often in the text of Scripture, God is beseeching us to stop going on like we have been. God beckons and commands us to turn about and amend our ways, from a standing in grace through Christ. Thus, gratitude is preached quite often. Calvin pulls no punches, and humbles himself and his hearers into the dust through the rebuke of God's Word. Yet from that place he is grateful, for the text also tells us that God has been kind to his people. For example, Calvin preached at the close of a sermon on 2 Timothy,

No one is prepared to submit to God. Is it any wonder, then, that God permits so many troubles and offences, and that even ministers and preachers fail to do their duty? It is extraordinary, or rather miraculous, that God should leave us with some seed of his Word,

²⁵ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Timothy* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2018), 66-67.

since we are so ungrateful. If God were to treat us as harshly as we deserve, devils would climb up into the pulpit and take on human flesh, in order to deceive the wicked and disobedient who are continually at war with God... As for us, let us thank our gracious God for warning us so that we are not deceived.²⁶

Calvin understood that severe blows were sometimes exactly what was needed from the Word of God. T.H.L. Parker summarizes Calvin's thought on this aspect of Christian instruction, "Those who cannot bear to be reproved had better look for another schoolmaster than God."²⁷ But Calvin also saw the necessity of correction, giving positive instruction so that believers may be *built up*. In his sermons, there is often a great deal of breaking down which occurs, but just as frequent is positive instruction given for the repair and edification of the heart in the solidness of Christ.

Learning in Calvin's School

Preachers and hearers today would do well to learn from Calvin's theology and practice of preaching. Every believer should meditate on the clarity and rigor which Calvin brought to the Scriptures. He did this because of what he believed about the Bible. In Calvin, we see a man who was utterly convinced that he had found treasure beyond the worth of anything he had encountered before. If we become as convinced as Calvin of the value of Scripture, our actions will follow suit. This should be taken as a knock against pragmatic, anti-intellectualist, and anti-theological tendencies. Calvin only produced work of enduring value because of the theology that his heart was grounded in. Without it, there would have been no fuel for his fire, he never would have become the man who Spurgeon called "that prince among men," and he would never have risen to the level of a first-rate expositor and theologian. Theology makes the man. Not just theology in the abstract, but whatever beliefs get worked all the way into the head and heart. Theology makes the man, and theology makes the preacher. For hearers of preaching also,

²⁶ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Timothy*, 292.

²⁷ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 14.

the value of the Scriptures should be thought about often. How grateful we ought to be for the opportunity to hear the words of God.

The work of the Holy Spirit in connection with the Word should be considered often by the preacher. He has a grave responsibility, but he is *never* alone in it. There are not varying levels of the Holy Spirit's presence in the Word, though the Holy Spirit may at times be present for one purpose, and at other times for another. The Holy Spirit does as he sees fit, and he does it through the Word. Preachers should learn gratitude for the Holy Spirit, and engage themselves all the more in prayer and careful exposition of Scripture. If it is the Word which the Holy Spirit uses, let us put out as much of the Word as we can, with as little mixture of error as we can, and see what the Holy Spirit will do.

Preachers should meditate on the force and Christ-centeredness of Calvin's preaching. Really, they should meditate on the force and Christ-centeredness of the Scriptures. Calvin's sermons are trustworthy examples of what it looks like to carry the two edged sword. To cut the conscience and to heal the wound. To afflict and to comfort. To cut no corners. Calvin warns, pleads, urges, condemns, offers, and rebukes. He expresses gratitude, gives thanks, exalts the person and work of Christ, and praises the Triune God in his preaching; and all with clarity, he never leaves the hearer guessing as to what he believes. Preachers today would do well to imitate the precision and force of application that Calvin used. But we must remember that Calvin's precision and force came from careful, painstaking wrestling with the text.

And finally, preachers should live holy lives, but they ought not place their confidence in that. Christ is sufficient, and the authority of the Word of God is not diminished by the foolishness of the preacher. The Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation. John Calvin took that as a fact. Do you?

*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for 30410. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals.

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