

## The History of the Reformation...Part 2

How  
Christ  
restored  
the gospel  
to his  
church



### A Bow Always Strung... Calvin as Pastor/Teacher

“He was a bow always strung.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s a great line isn’t it? It’s a great line and a wonderful metaphor. Calvin biographer Paul Henry attributes the remark to the German Reformer Wolfgang Musculus, who originally spoke the words in reference to Calvin’s extraordinary work ethic and heroic literary output.

“He was a bow always strung.”

I love the poetic imagery of that. I love the picture of Calvin as a weapon of war...a great war bow...always tightly strung, always fully stretched to the limit, always ready to fire away. And he was that...just that...a bow always strung. Now the interesting thing about the comment by Musculus is that it is not really even hyperbolic. That is, it is not an exaggeration. It is not one of those comments that was made to make someone look better than what they actually were. It wasn’t made to make Calvin appear bigger than life. That was unnecessary in

Calvin's case. You see John Calvin's literary and expository output are absolutely breathtaking. The breadth and depth and quantity of his preaching and teaching...are really something quite unparalleled in history. In fact, I think I would simply have to characterize literary and preaching output as something wondrous to behold. Calvin's sermonic and expository output boggles the mind and puts us modern preachers to shame not just in terms of quantity but in terms of quality as well.

How did he do it? That is, how did he manage to accomplish so much so well? Why did he do it? What did he expend so much energy preaching and teaching and writing? They are all great questions and are perhaps questions that can never really be answered fully.

One thing is clear; Calvin had an extraordinary work ethic...a work ethic that carried from his younger days as a student. One of his secretaries, Nicholas Colladon, had this to say:

I do not believe there can be found his like. For who could recount his ordinary and extraordinary labors? I doubt if any man in our time has had more to listen to, to reply to, to write, or things of greater importance. The multitude and quality alone of his writings is enough to astonish everyone who looks at them, and even more those who read them... He never ceased working, day and night, in the service of the Lord, and heard most unwillingly the prayers and exhortations that his friends addressed to him every day to give himself some rest.<sup>2</sup>

Do you get that? He was constantly at it and others pleaded with him to slow down...to take care of himself...but he invariably ignored their pleas. From Calvin's earliest school days, he practiced the habit of studying till midnight and

then getting up at four or five in the morning to review the material that he had covered the previous day. I think that fact provides at least part of the answer as to how Calvin developed such a prodigious memory and how he found the time...the time and opportunity to be so productive...the time and opportunity to crank out so much material to the benefit of the church at Geneva and to the glory of God. But it wasn't just time management with Calvin...time was important to Calvin but the bigger answer lies in the fact that Calvin practiced continual self-denial. To say it plainly, "Calvin went without." He went without sleep and he often went without food."

You see Calvin believed that preaching was the paramount duty of a minister. He believed that preaching provided comfort in a way that other ministry could not. And because he believed that preaching was so important, he applied himself to do it well.

Listen to what he says in his commentary on Isaiah chapter 50.

Hence we infer that the most important duty of the ministers of the word is, to comfort wretched men, who are oppressed by afflictions, or who bend under their weight, and, in short, to point out what is true rest and serenity of mind, as we have formerly seen. We are likewise taught what each of us ought chiefly to seek in the Scriptures, namely, that we may be furnished with doctrine appropriate and suitable for relieving our distresses, He who, by seasonable consolation, in afflictive or even desperate affairs, can cheer and support his heart, ought to know that he has made good proficiency in the Gospel. I acknowledge that doctrine has indeed various uses; for not only is it useful for comforting the afflicted and feeble, but it likewise contains severe reproofs and threatenings against the obstinate. But Isaiah shows that the chief duty incumbent on him is, to bring some consolation to *those* who, in the present distress, are ready to faint.<sup>3</sup>

And he says the same kind of thing in his commentary on I Timothy 4:15 where Paul tells Timothy to “take heed to these things.” Concerning that little phrase, “take heed to these things” Calvin writes this:

“The greater the difficulty in faithfully discharging the ministry of the Church, so much the more ought a pastor to apply himself earnestly, and with his whole might; and that not only for a short time, but with unfailing perseverance. Paul therefore reminds Timothy that this work leaves no room for indolence, or for slackening his labors, but demands the utmost industry and constant application.<sup>4</sup>

Now it is one thing to admonish others to take up their crosses...but it is something else altogether to do so yourself. But that is what Calvin did.

One writer explains how Calvin put his concerns into practice in his own ministry; “He robbed himself of sleep. His home was always open to anyone seeking advice. He was constantly in touch with the affairs of church and state. He visited the sick and lackadaisical, and knew almost every citizen; all in the midst of continuing illness, writing, heavy commitments in preaching and lecturing and attention to the minutiae that crowd every pastor’s life.”<sup>5</sup>

Colladon writes this:

As to his ordinary life, everyone will bear witness that he was very abstemious, without any excess or meanness, but a praiseworthy moderation. It is true that for his stomach's sake he abstained from some common foods that he was fond of, but this was without being fastidious or troublesome in company. One fault he had was that in his abstinence he took little regard to his health, mostly being content for many years with a single meal a day and never taking anything between two meals... His reasons were the weakness of his stomach and his migraine, which he said he had proved by experiment, could be remedied only by a continual diet. Sometimes I have known him to go without any food into the second day.<sup>6</sup>

Six years after his death Nicholas des Gallars, a minister of the gospel and the Reformer's secretary, wrote in a letter to the printer Jean Crespini:

When I look back upon his frankness and integrity, his affectionate benevolence towards me and the familiar intimacy which I enjoyed for sixteen years, I cannot but grieve for my separation from such a friend or, I would say, such a father. What labors, watchings and anxieties did he endure! With what wisdom and perspicacity did he foresee all dangers and how skillfully did he go out to meet them! No words of mine can declare the fidelity and prudence with which he gave counsel, the kindness with which he received all who came to him, the clearness and promptitude with which he replied to those who asked for his opinion on the most important questions, and the ability with which he disentangled the difficulties and problems which were laid before him. Nor can I express the gentleness with which he would console the afflicted and raise the fallen and distressed or his courage in adversity and moderation in prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

But Calvin did not always share that view about himself. He was his own worse critic. He wrote to his friend de Falais in March 1546 in a state of deep disappointment:

The difficulty arises from the annoyances and interruptions of the train of thought which intervene to break off a letter in the midst twenty times over, or even more, beyond all bounds. As regards health, I was much more feeble when I wrote to you a little ago than I am now. But although I am pretty well physically, I am unceasingly tormented with a heaviness which will not let me do a thing. Apart from the sermons and lectures, here is a month gone by in which I have scarce done anything, in such wise that I am almost ashamed to live thus useless.<sup>8</sup>

John Piper notes, rightly I think, that that month of indolence and annoyance and interruption that so frustrated Calvin and made him feel unproductive produced about 20 sermons and 12 lectures.<sup>9</sup> In other words over the course of a month when he was both exhausted and sick, Calvin preached 32 times.

Now this morning, I want to talk to you in the few minutes I have left about Calvin's preaching. I want to talk about its volume...that is how much preaching Calvin actually did. Then I want to talk about its nature...that is, what his preaching was like. And then finally I want to talk about its delivery...how it was crafted or delivered.

John Leith writes this:

The sheer volume of Calvin's preaching is impressive. At first (after his return to Geneva in 1541) he apparently preached twice on Sunday and then on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. In 1542, in response to demand, he preached more frequently; but this proved too much and the Council released him. In 1549 he preached twice on Sunday and every work day, every second week.

Calvin's sermons were recorded after 1549 by an excellent group of secretaries, headed by Denis de Raguénier, who sought to record them just as Calvin preached them. This service was supported by the Company of Refugees. In Raguénier's catalogue (1549-1560) 2,042 sermons are listed. An additional 263 were recorded later. Today we know the texts of 1,460 sermons, which means that about 1,000 have been lost. At the time of Calvin's death, or shortly thereafter, 780 sermons had been printed. Eight hundred seventy two were printed in the *Corpus Reformatorum*, and four volumes of sermons have been printed since 1961, containing 206 sermons, in the excellently edited editions of the *Supplementa Calviniana*. Stauffer estimates that the known sermons constitute about one-third of the Calvin corpus. The addition of the lost sermons would make the sermons one-half of Calvin's total writing. Even this estimate does not include sermons which were preached without any record.<sup>10</sup>

Author Stephen Key sums it up like this:

British scholar T.H.L. Parker, who has written two books on Calvin's preaching, presents a list of Calvin's sermons from various books of the Bible. Just to give you an example of the extensive nature of Calvin's sermon series, he preached 123 sermons from Genesis, 200 from Deuteronomy, 159 from Job, 342 or 343 from Isaiah, and 189 from the Book of Acts. A shorter series from John Calvin would

be a 43-sermon series from Galatians, a 28-sermon series from the prophecy of Micah, or 25 from the book of Lamentations. Although there are no records of his sermons prior to 1549, from that year to the end of his life in 1564 Calvin preached 2,040 sermons. Compare that to the roughly 1,500 sermons a Protestant Reformed minister would preach over a similar 15-year period! Considering that, during much of that time, he preached ten sermons every two weeks, not a few ministers today might think, "No wonder he died young!"<sup>11</sup>

Now do you get that? He preached...a lot...a lot more than we moderns do. He preached a lot...but that wasn't the extent of his ministry. He wrote books and churned out commentaries on the various books of the Bible. During his stay in Geneva he also wrote some 4,000 letters which by my count means he wrote at least one letter every other day. And, of course, he did all the other ministerial duties. He preached funerals and did weddings and made pastoral visits. From 1550 to 1559 he performed just over 270 weddings which means he did a wedding about every other week. At one point, the council forbade him from doing pastoral visits to homes where someone had the plague. They did so because they did not want to give up his preaching.<sup>12</sup>

Now I want you to get a sense of what Calvin's preaching was like. I think we tend to think that his preaching was heady and incomprehensible. It was anything but that. Now in order to make my point I simply want to read a few paragraphs from Doug Kelly's translation of one of Calvin's sermons from 2 Samuel. It won't take long, I think for you to get a sense of what he was like when he was preaching. Now I should add I am skipping between paragraphs just to give a flavor...so if something is not quite connected that will be my fault not Calvin's.

We began to see yesterday how Michal's pride caused her to treat the worship

of God with contempt. For even though the king and all the people had gone to bring home this container of the covenant with God, which was a testimony that he wanted to dwell in the midst of his people, she still remained in the house. And then she only looked out of the window, and did not go back with the others, as if she were separated from the Church. Soon we see how this same pride made her despise her husband, looking upon him as a common man. It is true that her pride was hidden in her heart, but the Holy Spirit condemned this wicked attitude, even though it was unknown to men. So that is how Michal had already condemned herself, in that she had begun to disdain David because he had humbled himself before the ark. Well, it says that she spat out her venom, so that her pride, previously hidden and known only to God, was now manifested before men.

Now it says that Michal reproached him for 'having acted like a tramp' (2 Sam. 6:20). The word implies someone vile, as they say: a good-for-nothing. She compares him (I say) to tramp, since he stripped himself before the ark of God. Now h was not alone, but it seemed to her that he should not put himself in the rank of the common people but retain his royal gravity. She put the worst possible construction on David's self-abasement, and claimed that he had made himself like a tramp. This showed how deeply infected her heart was with pride because of her royal blood. How often we see this in those who have some noble ancestry. Even though God has abased them and removed every opportunity to be proud of themselves, yet they never fail to flatter themselves with that pride rooted in them by nature. We see many of them who cannot bow their neck, even when God has conquered them, but always remain haughty, even when they have their heads nearly cracked and broken! That is how Michal was. Her father had been condemned by God. His end was wretched. She saw his house totally broken down, and ruined so thoroughly that no-one even dared to claim to belong to this family or to their friends. So many shameful things happened to him that it was amazing. Nevertheless, she could not bow down, because she was hardened in her presumption.

Now here we see what a plague pride is. For anyone infected with it will not only despise his neighbors, but will even be contemptuous of God. For the foundation of true piety— that is, of the fear of God and of his worship - is humility. Yet while men lift themselves up and are inflated with pride, it

is impossible for them to submit themselves to God. With this in mind, if we want to prepare ourselves to worship God properly, let us learn to forget all haughtiness, and not make ourselves believe this or that in order to elevate ourselves. Instead, let us be as nothing. That is how we must begin our worship of God. At the same time, we must converse with our neighbors in all modesty and kindness towards others. Nevertheless, if we tolerate a little pride in ourselves, it will most certainly engender all sorts of trouble, envy and vexation. Furthermore, let us not seek to stamp underfoot those whom we cannot tolerate as brothers and companions. For it is certain that he who is driven by haughtiness and ambition would like to see everybody put a hundred feet underground and kept under the dirt!

Let us pay careful attention to what we learn from Michal's behavior: namely, that since she was so proud and haughty, not only did she despise her husband, but also she could not tolerate even God being honored. Even if she did have a high regard for herself, even if she had possessed all the dignities that one can imagine in the world, still she should have remembered that the greatest kings are dust and ashes. When we compare such a frail creature as man to the living God, should not his celestial majesty abase everything that can be opposed to it? Now that is how pride blinds all those who are addicted to it.

In sum, we see how we must offer to God worship that counts. For as the prophet Jeremiah says, God regards the truth (Jer. 5:3); he is not interested in what is external, and has a lovely appearance and bright reflection before men. Rather, he wants us to have a pure and right affection. Therefore, when it comes to honoring God, let us begin in the same way that David was touched, that is, to be nothing in ourselves, to recognize that until we are blotted out, God will not have the glory which belongs to him. For every mouth must be shut when it comes to honoring God. And what does it mean - the 'mouth shut'? It means that we cannot find any reason to exalt ourselves, but that we are confounded. Now this is precisely what the true worship of God involves, that we be small in our own eyes.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God in recognition of all our faults, praying him to make us feel them more and more, so as to make us displeased with them and hence to ask pardon for them. And so may it make us also draw back from them with such repentance that more and more we might endeavor and strive to give ourselves fully to him. May we do so in truth

and without pretence, and may all our feelings and all our thoughts agree in that. And so may our life hereafter prove how sincere our zeal has been. And may he grant this grace not only to us, but to all peoples and nations of the earth.<sup>13</sup>

Now does that seem too heady to you? It certainly doesn't to me. It seems almost simplistic and yet I wonder if that is not what we ought to aim at. Perhaps simplistic is the wrong word...but surely simple or simpler would be alright. Now I don't want you to get the idea that Calvin dumbed things down without any sort of reflection. He didn't. He used words like "justification" and "sanctification" and "imputation" and "substitutionary" when he preached. But he did so in a way that taught his congregation to understand the words in their proper theological context. In other words, he used simple language but chose not to strip it down to where it had no meaning. He tried to elevate his audience.

Now...let me talk for a moment about Calvin's sermons themselves. That is, let me talk about how they were delivered. Calvin preached through books. He would usually take a few verses and place them in their context and then simply explain their meaning. He did so without notes...or a manuscript and he usually preached for about an hour at a time. The next time in the pulpit he would take up where he had left off the previous time.

I have already mentioned the fact that when Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 after being run out of town three years earlier, he simply put in where he had left off from his last sermon. That fact alone explains his commitment to preaching through the text. And that was his pattern after his return in 1541...he just preached through the text. Of course, he had to preach a few "single sermons"

over the course of his career but it looks like to me that there were less than a couple of dozen.

Steven Lawson put it like this:

For the duration of his ministry, Calvin's approach was to preach systematically through entire books of the Bible. Rarely was he out of a book study. "Sunday after Sunday, day after day," Parker writes, "Calvin climbed up the steps into the pulpit. There he patiently led his congregation verse by verse through book after book of the Bible." Rare were the exceptions to this pattern. "Almost all Calvin's recorded sermons are connected series on books of the Bible." As a faithful shepherd, he fed his congregation a steady diet of sequential expository messages. This verse-by-verse style—*lectio continua*, the "continuous expositions"<sup>34</sup>—guaranteed that Calvin would preach the full counsel of God. Difficult and controversial subjects were unavoidable. Hard sayings could not be skipped. Difficult doctrines could not be overlooked. The full counsel of God could be heard.<sup>14</sup>

So there you have it. John Calvin preached to the congregation of St Pierre, usually twice every Sunday and once every day of alternate weeks. (This practice varied at different times of his ministry, and was dependant on the state of his health). He preached through the Bible. He preached the New Testament on Sunday mornings and the Psalms on Sunday afternoon. He preached the Old Testament during the week. Following this schedule he preached 4000 sermons after his return to Geneva; more than 170 sermons a year.<sup>15</sup> And it was his preaching more than anything else...more than his books...more than his letters...more even than his personal, private ministry that transformed and settled the reformed church. And the reason it did so is because the Word of God is sharp and powerful.

Lawson quotes James Boice saying this:

Calvin had no weapon but the Bible...Calvin preached from the Bible everyday and under the power of that preaching he city of Geneva began to be transformed. As the people of Geneva acquired knowledge of God's Word and began to be changed by it, they became, as John Knox called it later, a new Jerusalem from which the gospel spread to the rest of Europe, England and the New World...and I think even to a place called Keller, Texas.<sup>16</sup>

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Henry, *Life and Times of John Calvin the Great Reformer* trans. by Henry Stebbing (London: Whittaker and Company, 1849), 425.

<sup>2</sup> T.H.L Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 131.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 50:4.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, 4:15.

<sup>5</sup> Dr John Haverland, "Calvin the Pastor" a paper read at the Calvin Symposium at Grace Theological College in Auckland, New Zealand, 2009.

<http://www.gtc.ac.nz/Files/Calvin%20Symposium%2009/Calvin%20the%20Pastor.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> T.H.L Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Ian M. Tait, "Calvin's Ministry of Encouragement" in *Presbyterion* 11 no 1 Spr 1985, 43.

<sup>8</sup> T.H.L Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 131.

<sup>9</sup> John Piper, "The Divine Majesty of the Word...John Calvin: The Man and His Preaching" at the 1997 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. The sermon is found on the web in both print and mp3.

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1471\\_The\\_Divine\\_Majesty\\_of\\_the\\_Word/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1471_The_Divine_Majesty_of_the_Word/)

<sup>10</sup> John H. Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research." *Review & Expositor* 86 no 1 Wint 1989, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen R. Key, "Calvin the Preacher" in *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 43 November, 2009, 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> John Dillenberger, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), 9.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* trans. by Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 279-294.

<sup>14</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2007), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Dr John Haverland, "Calvin the Pastor" a paper read at the Calvin Symposium at Grace Theological College in Auckland, New Zealand, 2009.

<http://www.gtc.ac.nz/Files/Calvin%20Symposium%2009/Calvin%20the%20Pastor.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2007), 1.