

John Calvin on Evangelism and Missions

One of the most fallacious charges against Calvin is that he did not fuel a passion for evangelism and missions. Others assert that Calvin was responsible for relighting the torch of biblical evangelism during the reformation and thus should be credited with being a theological father of the reformed missionary movement. Views of Calvin's attitude toward evangelism and missions have ranged on the positive side from hearty to moderate support, and on the negative side from silent indifference to active opposition. Calvin's teaching and his practice both confirm that he was a model evangelist. Calvin taught evangelism in a general way by earnestly proclaiming the gospel and by reforming the church according to biblical requirements. More specifically, Calvin taught evangelism by focusing on the universality of Christ's kingdom and the responsibility of Christians to help extend that realm.

Calvin asserted that both God's sovereignty and our responsibility are involved in evangelism. The work of evangelism is ultimately God's work, not ours, but God uses us as His instruments. Calvin writes that the gospel "*does not fall from the clouds like rain,*" but is "*brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it.*" God "uses our work and summons us to be his instruments in cultivating his field." The power to save rests with God, but He reveals His salvation through the preaching of the gospel. God's evangelism thus causes our evangelism.²² He allows us to participate in "*the honor of constituting his own Son governor over the whole world.*"

According to Calvin, this convergence of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in evangelism means that we must pray daily for the extension of Christ's kingdom.²⁴ We should not become discouraged by a lack of visible success in evangelism but pray on, believing that "*Christ shall manifestly exercise the power given to him for our salvation and for that of the whole world.*" We must also diligently work for the extension of Christ's kingdom, knowing that our work will not be in vain.

We evangelize for many reasons, Calvin says: God commands us to do so, God leads us by His own example, evangelism is our duty to God, we want to glorify Him⁰ and please Him,¹ we are grateful to Him,² and evangelism is our duty to fellow sinners.

Calvin taught we must make full use of the opportunities God gives to evangelize. "*When an opportunity for edification presents itself, we should realize that a door has been opened for us by the hand of God in order that we may introduce Christ into that place and we should not refuse to accept the generous invitation that God thus gives us,*" he wrote. On the other hand, when opportunities are restricted and doors of evangelism are closed to our witness, we should not persist in trying to do what cannot be done. rather, we should pray and seek other opportunities. "*The door is shut when there is no hope of success. [Then] we have to go a different way rather than wear ourselves out in vain efforts to get through it,*" Calvin wrote.

"*Difficulties in witnessing, however, are not an excuse to stop trying. To those suffering severe restrictions and persecutions in France, Calvin wrote: "Let every one strive to attract and win over to Jesus Christ those whom he can."*

Calvin practiced what he taught. His efforts can be categorized into four concentric circles. First, Calvin evangelized in his local congregation of Geneva, beginning with preaching. Calvin reached out to unsaved people through his preaching, impressing them with the necessity of faith in Christ and what that meant. Calvin made it clear that he did not believe everyone in his flock was saved. Though charitable toward church members who maintained a commendable outward lifestyle, he referred more than thirty times in his commentaries and nine times in his Institutes (only counting references within .21 to .24) to the small numbers of those who received the preached Word with saving faith. "If the same sermon is preached, say, to a hundred people, twenty receive it with the ready obedience of faith, while the rest hold it valueless, or laugh, or hiss, or loathe it," Calvin said.

Second, Calvin used preaching as a tool to spread the reformation throughout the city of Geneva. On Sundays, the Genevan Ordinances required sermons in each of the three churches at day-break and at 9 a.m. at noon, children went to catechism classes. at p.m., sermons were preached again in each church. Weekday sermons were scheduled at various times in the three churches on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. By the time Calvin died, a sermon was preached in every church nearly each day of the week.

Third, Calvin sought to evangelize all of Europe. The reputation and influence of the Genevan community spread to neighboring France, then to Scotland, England, the Netherlands, parts of western Germany, and sections of Poland and Hungary. Calvin increasingly viewed Geneva as a kind of model for the reformed movement and for Christ's reign throughout the world.

Inspired by Calvin's ecumenical vision, Geneva became a nucleus from which evangelism spread throughout the world. In 1561 alone, 142 men were sent out from the Geneva academy on missions to different places in the world. That is an amazing accomplishment for an effort that began with a small church struggling within a tiny city-republic.

Finally, Calvin became involved in overseas missions, most notably, a mission effort among the Indians in Brazil. With the help of a Huguenot sympathizer, Gaspard de Coligny, admiral of France, and the support of Henry II, then king of France, Nicolas Durand (also called Villegagnon; 1510–1571) led an expedition to Brazil in 1555 to establish a colony. When trouble erupted in the new colony near rio de Janeiro, Villegagnon turned to the Huguenots in France, asking for better settlers. He also appealed to Coligny, to Calvin, and to the church in Geneva.

The Company of pastors chose two ministers and eleven laymen to send to Brazil. as Neal Hegeman writes:

The first protestant congregation in the New World was started in Coligny, Brazil, in april of 1557. The Coligny expedition turned out to be short lived as the Vice admiral Nicholas Durand de Vil- legagnon (1510–1571) betrayed the French Huguenots and the colonists. The fruit of the first protestant entrance into the New World was the martyrdom of Jean du Bordel, Matthieu Vermeil, and pierre Bourdon, who died at the hands of Villegagnon. These men wrote the "Coligny Confession," the first confessional and theological document to be written in the New World.

Later, the Portuguese destroyed the remainder of the settlement. Calvin was clearly interested in spreading the gospel overseas, but that interest was limited by time constraints, his work at home, and by government restrictions. Nearly every door to the heathen world was closed to Calvin and fellow reformers. The world of Islam to the south and east was guarded by Turkish armies, while the navies of Spain and Portugal prevented access to the recently discovered New World. additionally, most of the governments in Europe were controlled by roman Catholic princes, kings, and emperors. The conclusion is seamless: both Calvin's writings and practice showed his large heart for evangelism to extend the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. establishing the heavenly reign of God upon earth was so important, Calvin said, that it "*ought not only to occupy the chief place among our cares, but even absorb all our thoughts.*"

- Dr. Joel Beeke