

Calvin's Commentary and Sermons on Acts 1 – 7: A Comparison

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This Colloquium on Calvin Studies has regularly been attended by a good number of preachers of the Word of God. Some may also have written commentaries on one or more biblical books, and perhaps even done so while simultaneously preaching a series of sermons on the same book. John Calvin treated a number of books of Scripture in both sermons and commentaries. Most of his Old Testament commentaries were in fact lectures (*praelectiones*) rather than written compositions.

Calvin preached right through the Acts of the Apostles on Sunday mornings between August 25, 1549 and March 1554. Of these sermons only 51 on the first seven chapters (which in total probably provided some 70 in all) have survived, of which all but seven were first published in 1994 in *Supplementa Calviniana* volume 8. We have, then, a reasonably comprehensive series of sermons on Acts 1 - 7, delivered between August 1549 and January 1551.¹

The first part of Calvin's commentary on Acts, dealing with chapters 1 - 13, issued from the press in both French and Latin versions in the early months of 1552. (There is no evidence that Calvin ever lectured on Acts.) It seems that he began work on Acts early in 1550, and a letter to Farel in November of that year discloses that he had by then only done a third of it. This must mean that during most of 1550 he was both preaching and writing a commentary on the early chapters of Acts. The sermons had begun earlier, so that by the beginning of 1550 Calvin had reached the climax of Peter's address on the day of Pentecost, but the commentary proceeded more quickly, if Calvin had covered nine chap-

¹For details see Willem Balke and Wilhelmus H. Th. Moehn (eds), *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles* (*Supplementa Calviniana* 8; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1994), xi - xix. This volume is referred to hereafter as SC8.

ters or so by November.² Nevertheless, we have here a uniquely close coincidence between his preaching and his commenting on the same stretch of Scripture. They cry out for comparison.

One further introductory issue has to be mentioned. The second part of the Acts commentary was published in 1554, and then in 1560 Calvin brought out a revised edition of both parts together. The revisions comprise very largely additions, which the *Calvini Opera* text helpfully prints in italics. This should enable us to avoid citing later elements when sermons and commentary are compared. The additions can be identified easily from the *apparatus criticus* in the new edition by Helmut Feld, but not from the modern translation in the Torrance series, nor from the Calvin Translation Society volume (which reproduces a sixteenth-century translation).³

The first thing to note is the considerably greater length of the sermons than the commentary. In bare word-count they are about six times longer, but Latin is more economic by far (lacking, for example, both definite and indefinite articles).⁴ Nevertheless, the greater expansiveness of the sermons, perhaps four times more extended than the commentary, is very marked, if not wholly surprising from our general expectations of the two genres, at least in Calvin's case. In the preface to his first biblical commentary, on Romans, he had established conciseness as one of his goals as a commentator. I am not aware that he ever gave brevity as the proper aim of a preacher, let alone of himself as preacher.

These sermons on Acts have not a little to say about preaching. An obvious prompt was the commitment of the Twelve to devote themselves "to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). This responsibility was not as easy as it seemed. "There are many who think that one has only to mount the pulpit and talk and chat there for an hour, and that's all." Calvin is unhappy with the inference that the apostles had in fact been neglecting this service (as 6:2 might imply).

²T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd edit. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 29-30, 213; R. Peter, J.-F. Gilmont, *Bibliotheca Calviniana. Les œuvres de Jean Calvin publiées au XVII^e siècle, I: Écrits théologiques, littéraires et juridiques 1532-1554* (Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 255; Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1991), 432-5, 441-2.

³Peter, Gilmont, *Bibliotheca Calviniana* II: 1555-1564 (Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 281, 1994), 737-42; *Calvini Opera* 48, iii; *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. H. Beveridge, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), an edited reprint of the 1585 translation by Christopher Fetherstone; *Calvin's Commentaries. The Acts of the Apostles 1-13*, tr. John W. Fraser and W.J.C. McDonald (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965); Helmut Feld (ed.), *Commentariorum in Acta Apostolorum Liber Primus (Opera Omnia Denuo Recognita, ser. II: Opera Exegetica 12/1)*; Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2001); henceforth this edition will be cited as *COR*II/12/1.

⁴Balke and Moehn give the word-count of each sermon in *SC*8, xiii-xiv. The average duration of Calvin's sermons is normally given as about an hour (cf. T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992, 62), but Parker has calculated that they 'show an astonishing range of length': *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 23 n. 35.

Very often with great diligence and persistence they spent four or five hours teaching and proclaiming the word of God, as we have seen in the story of Sapphira. Between the death of her husband and her own death there was an interval of three hours during which the believers persevered attentively in the teaching of the gospel declared to them by the apostles.⁵

In fact, neither in his earlier sermons on the episode nor in his commentary did Calvin draw attention to the elapse of three hours between the fates of the two dissemblers.

But it would be unsafe to assume that the prolixity of the sermons always ensured a treatment of the biblical text that was at least as comprehensive as the commentary's. The omissions of the preacher are often quite comprehensible, such as the actual election of the Seven and their commissioning (Acts 6:5-6),⁶ Gamaliel's recall of the abortive risings of Theudas and Judas the Galilean (5:36-7), and other individual verses, especially at the end of the passage for a particular sermon, such as 4:20, "We, Peter and John, cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard," and 6:10, "They, certain Jews of the Diaspora, could not stand up against his, Stephen's, wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke." More noteworthy is the lack of mention of the second part of 1:8, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The commentary gives it a full column, but so programmatic an utterance for Acts as a whole is passed over in silence in the parallel sermon.⁷

This omission does mean, however, that Calvin the preacher is less emphatic about the missionary thrust of the apostolic church than Calvin the commentator. Luke reports in Acts 6:7 the growth of the Word of God. The commentary identifies two forms of such growth, the increase of new disciples and the inward progress of Christians in obedience to God's Word. The rest of the verse shows that it is the former sense that is in view here. The sermon similarly recognizes the two meanings, pays the greater attention in a lengthy exposition to the numerical increase of the church but does not exclude the other sense. Indeed, it combines the two in teaching that growing conformity to the will of God issues in Christian words and deeds by which others are won to the faith of Christ. Nevertheless, the accent falls on what we might call the quantitative "growth of the Word of God" – a phrase which the preacher is careful to explain, given that "the Word of God, in itself, remains always in one state, since we know it is the unchangeable truth."⁸

⁵SC8, 211/13-14, 210/16-20. The English translations in this paper are my own.

⁶There are allusions or references in the preceding sermon, SC8, 198/28, 200/19-20, 203/34.

⁷The sermon is among seven published earlier; see *Calvini Opera* 48, 610-14. Henceforth the *Calvini Opera* will be referred to as *CO*.

⁸SC8, 217/1-2, 216/33-6.

The Word of God grows “if there is a country where the gospel has never been declared and now the gospel reaches there.” A growth of the Word of God takes place in a city where there are two or three believers and each of them wins half a dozen more. As the number of disciples increases, the Word also is enlarged (*se dilate*) proportionately. Calvin adduces the Gospel parables of the yeast and the mustard seed.

Let us learn, therefore, in accord with what is shown here by Luke, that then shall we be a true church of God when we strive, as much as is in us, to make the number of believers increase. Then each of us, in his or her own place, will apply every effort to teach our neighbours and bring them to the knowledge of God, both by words and by showing them a good example and good manner of life. That is why holy Scripture so often exhorts us to win for God those who are still strangers to his church. If we do not do so, it will be a sign that we have made little progress in the school of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹

Calvin continues to drive home his exhortation. “This is not at all said only to preachers and those who proclaim the Word of God, but it is the duty (*office*) of all Christians in general.” He rehearses more fully the two means, of word and of life, by which this duty is fulfilled, demonstrates the perverse relationship between the two when behaviour discredits profession, and piles argument upon argument to arouse his hearers to their calling. Twice he refers to this “true sign of Christianity, of our being Christian,” “this mark of Christianity given here by St Luke – that is, that we take pains and apply all our zeal to draw benighted souls (*les pauvres ignorans*) to God, so that the number of believers may increase and God be served by all with one accord.”¹⁰

This long passage is a good example of the common ground between commentary and sermon – chiefly, the twofold sense of the growth of the Word of God – alongside the greater expansiveness and directness of the sermon. Much of the difference belongs to the distinctive nature of the sermonic form, but it is nevertheless noteworthy that it is in the sermon that Calvin moves towards making missionary expansion a mark of the church. He does not quite get there. But the missionary responsibility of Christians in general – the missionary congregation, we might say – is an emphasis not glimpsed in the commentary.

The sermons are enlivened by a far richer streak of polemic against the papal church than the commentary. Allied to this is the greater frequency of discussions of baptism and the Lord's supper than in the commentary. After all, in these seven chapters of Acts the two sacraments appear only once each in chapter 2, apart from the promise of baptism with the Spirit in 1:5. Calvin's commentary denied that the breaking of bread from house to house in Acts 2:46 referred to the Lord's supper. The sermon on the verse has not survived.

⁹SC8, 216/38-41, 217/20-26, 34-5.

¹⁰SC8, 218/1-2, 30, 219/7-10.

Early in his defence before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, Stephen states that God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision (7:8). Calvin's written exposition makes clear with the aid of Romans 4 that promise and righteousness preceded circumcision, sees no need to discuss further here the nature and meaning of circumcision and notes that "God makes a covenant with us in sacraments which are neither marks only of outward profession nor empty forms, because God ... represents nothing in them that he does not bestow."¹¹ Calvin's clarity and economy are admirable.

The corresponding sermon, of some 5700 words in French, deals almost entirely with this one verse and slightly with the next. Like the commentary, it locates circumcision as a sign confirming, not causing, Abraham's justification, and Romans 4 is cited. The free-range preacher then takes over. Stephen's words, "God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision," were spoken to show for what purpose (the) sacraments were appointed – that "we should be confirmed in the love that God bears us, acknowledge him as our Father and be assured that he holds us as his people and his children ... Will we, I say, treat the sacraments which God has appointed for us in the greatest honour and reverence and receive them on these terms?"¹² The papists do not, and immediately Calvin embarks on their perversion of the sacraments – shutting up salvation in baptism itself, instead of letting it lead us to the blood of Christ, stopping at the external sign, having fun with corruptible water, making the mass into execrable idolatry by presenting a sacrifice to God and so abolishing the death and passion of Christ.

The key to right understanding of the sacraments lies in the word "covenant" (*alliance*). Even between human beings there can be no contract (*contract*) for a handful of dollars unless the two parties are aware what one promises to the other and that what is promised is accepted. How much more is this true with our salvation? The words are essential to elucidate the signs. Human infidelity cannot abolish the truth of God, but what there is of God in baptism has remained despite Satan and despite the papists. They have done away with its doctrine. There is only mumbling in it, as though it were black magic (*sorcellerie*). They mutter (*barbottent*) in a strange language, and they have added all manner of paraphernalia (*menuz fatras*) – spittle and candles, salt and oil, one thing after another. But one will not hear a single word about what baptism is for.¹³ As for the supper, the profanation is even more horrid. Everything is turned upside down, and there is as much likeness between mass and Lord's supper as between night and day, Satan and Christ.¹⁴

¹¹CO 48, 134-5; COR II/12/1, 183.

¹²SC8, 255/2-4, 7-8.

¹³Cf. SC8, 255/23 – 256/2.

¹⁴Cf. SC8, 256/11-13.

Then Calvin moves on to the function of sacraments as visible, public aids for our feeble faith – sacraments as divine accommodation, although the tell-tale vocabulary of accommodation is not used here. The word alone would suffice, were it not for our infirmity and sluggishness and our doubting consciences. So God has not only given us his promises but has “imprinted his signature in our bodies, branded us with his mark (*seau*) in baptism.”¹⁵

The sermon proceeds through other heads of sacraments doctrine. The Holy Spirit alone makes baptism profitable; the sign by itself possesses no power (*vertu*). The evidence is before our eyes, for “all are baptized indiscriminately,” yet how many continue to be reprobate? The *verité* of the sacraments is Jesus Christ. “Their substance is contained in Jesus Christ. It is to him that baptism sends us. Where will we be washed except in the blood which he shed for our redemption?”¹⁶ In the light of this teaching, Calvin turns back to spell out the significance of circumcision. For a couple of pages he rejoins his text.

He then returns not only to the present but also to Geneva and its much-vaunted *reformation*.

It is true that there are fine ordinances, but they are written on paper. People don't give much attention to practising them. Today they pride themselves in Geneva and say, “Have we not been reformed by the gospel? Don't we observe the sacraments in their purity and integrity?” Sure (*Ouy bien*), but see how much it all profits us.¹⁷

The preacher sketches a deplorable picture of Genevan mores; everything among us is corruption. Beware lest the evangelical reformation to which God has been pleased to call us becomes for us a double condemnation ... We must join together the word, the sacraments and their effect if we want to benefit ... It's not enough to claim that baptism is administered in Geneva as ordained by God. What good will it do us to have baptism in its true usage and yet each of us is given over to all evil and the world holds sway in us more than ever? It is even worse if we take refuge in baptism and the supper to cover our sinfulness. We'd like the supper of our Lord Jesus Christ to be a cloak to conceal our filth and perversity, with the words “We've got the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It's true that it's really holy, but where's the holiness we bring to it?¹⁸

This, Calvin concludes, is what St Stephen shows us here in Acts 7 in these verses. At the very least the sermon reveals to us some of Calvin's besetting preoccupations. On the Sunday in question there is no evidence that baptism or the supper was held in Geneva. Indeed, on another occasion when we know that Calvin did administer baptism in St Gervais, the sermon, on Acts 3:17-19,

¹⁵SC8, 258/5-6.

¹⁶SC8, 258/10-14, 28-30.

¹⁷SC8, 261/14, 5-9

¹⁸SC8, 261/19-20, 30-36, 262/15-18.

made no reference to the sacraments whatsoever. But the train of thought in the preacher's mind, which hung this long development about the two sacraments on the phrase "the covenant of circumcision," is not unparalleled in this series of sermons. Later in Stephen's speech he retells the Israelites' idolatry in the desert (Acts 7:42-44). In two sermons on these verses Calvin adverts several times to the papal perversion of the sacraments and to the Genevans' false confidence in their externals alone.¹⁹ Impressive is Calvin's repeated insistence that baptism and the supper direct us to Christ "who is their truth and substance." "We should know that the substance of everything God wills us to observe in his church is Jesus Christ."²⁰ The commentary on this passage, which in general tenor is markedly historical and linguistic, applies the condemnation of idolatry to the papacy, but only in the strict sense of the worship of images and statues. For the rest the church's sacraments are nowhere in view.

Calvin took his time preaching through the climactic afterword to Peter's Pentecost address in Acts 2:38-39. His first sermon, on 2:36-38, delivered on Sunday December 22, 1549, does not touch on baptism. But since three days later on Christmas Day they would together come to the supper of Christ, Calvin devotes the final part of the sermon to preparation to partake with genuine repentance and receptivity.²¹ The next Sunday sermon, on Acts 2:38, announces four heads to be treated, of which the last would be God's sealing our remission of sins by the visible sign of baptism.²² In the event, baptism scrapes only a bare mention, apart from a paragraph on papal insistence on satisfactions to cover sins committed after baptism.²³ The next surviving sermon comes three weeks later, so that one and perhaps two sermons on Acts 2:38 have been lost. One of them was certainly devoted to baptism.²⁴ Accordingly we do not know whether in preaching Calvin in effect corrected Peter's sequence in Acts 2:38, as he did in his commentary: "Although in the setting of this passage baptism here precedes remission of sins, in actual order it follows it, because it is none other than a seal of the blessings we obtain through Christ." The commentary in fact displays further unease about the verse. Calvin returns to Peter's sequence and justifies it awkwardly as follows: we receive by faith (not of course mentioned by Peter), baptism helps confirm and increase faith, and so remission of sins, the fruit of faith, is rightly annexed to baptism as to the lesser means. But we must not derive a "definition" of baptism from this place, because Peter touches only an aspect of it. Nor does Peter's linking baptism to

¹⁹SC 8, 351/11-28, 356/34 – 357/5, 361/23-34, 362/19 – 363/23.

²⁰SC 8, 355/21-2, 357/5-7.

²¹SC 8, 16/22 – 17/15.

²²SC 8, 20/11-17.

²³SC 8, 26/24-5.

²⁴See SC 8, xvii nn. 58-9.

the name of Christ have anything to say about the form of baptism, a “fixed formula of baptizing,” i.e. it does not invalidate the requirement of the Trinitarian name.²⁵ We cannot tell whether Calvin’s sermons displayed similar qualms.

When extant sermons resume, on January 19, the text is Acts 2:39-40, “The promise is made to you and to your children ...” The commentary here focuses on the imperative of believing response to the divine promise made known only by the divine word, and then on the three categories it embraces, Jews, their children (taken literally, against Anabaptist denial of baptism to infants) and gentiles. The sermon, on the other hand, while it contains all these elements, introduces *une aultrre doctrine*, namely, that sacraments, and baptism in particular, are nothing apart from the divine word or promise.²⁶ This criterion exposes the falsity of the papists’ seven sacraments, and provides the main justification given here for infant baptism. “God extends his mercy to our children and wills them to share in the same grace he bestows on us. Babies within their mother’s womb are like brute beasts as far as understanding goes. Nevertheless, God accepts them as his own, and promises them eternal life.”²⁷ Circumcision is mentioned very briefly in both commentary and sermon, but only as the sign of the promise.

The sermons routinely touched on events or behaviour in Geneva which the more detached commentary rarely glimpses. Among these was a dishonouring of the rite of baptism, which Calvin berated in a sermon on Acts 5:13-16 (which does not directly or indirectly refer to baptism). He raised this issue in the course of one of several sections in these sermons in which he confronts the Genevans’ claim to be a Reformation community with the unreformed reality.²⁸ So few recall the fact of their baptism and the rationale of it. They ought to rehearse this teaching every time infants were baptized. Instead, like dogs or pigs who put their snout in the door, people come to the entrance of the church and go home without entering for the baptismal service. Calvin acknowledges that it was customary for the baptismal party to be accompanied to the church door and no further.²⁹ Some watched the service from the doorway, while it was also common for the baptismal family to be present only for the baptism and not for the preceding sermon. A further abuse was walking through the church while baptism was in progress. We know of these problems also from sermons on Jeremiah preached in August 1549 and from representations Calvin made to the council and corrective measures taken by the coun-

²⁵CO 48, 52, 53 54; COR II/12/1, 81, 82, 83.

²⁶SC8, 29/3-6.

²⁷SC8, 31/7-10, cf. 13-19.

²⁸SC8, 145/40 – 146/15.

²⁹SC8, 146/27 – 147/1.

cil during 1549 and 1550.³⁰ The Acts sermon therefore gives us a window into a current disquiet of Calvin's. "Folk come out to pay their honours to a human being, but they dishonour God, worse than spitting in his face. They've no interest in the baptism and the preaching that's done here."³¹

The Lord's supper also receives in the sermons attention disproportionate to its appearance in Acts 1 – 7. When Calvin come to Acts 2:41-42 ("they continued in the apostles' doctrine and in communion, breaking of bread and prayers"), he first emphasizes the necessity of perseverance, then clarifies what these four features or marks were ("communion" did not mean the Lord's supper, which was denoted by "the breaking of bread") and finally embarks on an extended polemic against papal pretensions to be the true church of God. The sermon parallels the sequence of treatment in the commentary except that both perseverance and the polemic receive far greater prominence, especially the latter. Calvin has barely got round to applying the word to the Genevan faithful before the end of the sermon. He will, he promises, have more to say the next Sunday.

A week later, when he set himself to expound the following verses, Acts 2:43-45, he returns again to two of the marks of the church, the supper and communion. After another blast against the mass, he zooms in on his hearers.

It is a great weakness in us that we do not celebrate the supper with a zeal equal to that of the primitive church. They had the supper not solely four times a year but administered it every Sunday, and even sometimes every day. Believers had such a desire to follow the Gospels' teaching that when they assembled they observed the supper at least every Sunday.³²

Since then, to be sure, the world has gone to pot. Jesus said, "Take it, drink it, all of you," but the priest drinks and gorges himself (*gourmande*) on his own. The mass is "an excommunication of everyone." To deprive the people of this communion is to excommunicate them.³³

As for ourselves, we have the pure doctrine of the Gospel, but we fall lamentably short of being able to receive the supper often, as the early Christians did. Even now when it is held only a few times a year, people come with all their disordered passions, their hatreds and grudges, their avarice and usury, their plunderings and thefts and blasphemies, their feuds and spitefulness. "So far are we from being disposed to receive the supper of our Lord Jesus Christ every day or every Sunday when we can hardly come four times a year without being still stuffed with our iniquities."³⁴ What ingrates we are, to God and his gospel and gifts!

³⁰For details see SC8, 146-7 n. 31.

³¹SC8, 147/1-4.

³²SC8, 47/30 – 48/3.

³³SC8, 48/6-9.

³⁴SC8, 48/23-6.

It is not without good cause, preaches Calvin, that St Luke has linked the supper and communion, to show how we should be a true unity together, members of one body.

In fact, at the time when it was observed more frequently than now, at this ceremony of the supper they kissed each other to attest the brotherly love we should have for each other. Then also they gave alms to help those in need and showed thereby that they were not called "brothers" in vain.³⁵

Calvin stresses this particular communal activity of almsgiving. But everything was utterly subverted under the papacy!

Yet we must hold to the true rule we have in the teaching of the apostles, that we be united together as members of a body in true union and brotherly love, sharing one with another according to our means, if we value God's approval of our assemblies and our common participation in his sacraments.³⁶

This note is strongly accented in the rest of the sermon, on the so-called "communism" of the first "Jesus people" (Acts 2:44-45). Whereas the preacher's elaboration on *κοινωνία* is scarcely paralleled in the commentary, now the two follow similar tracks, leading one to suppose either close contemporaneity between them, or, more probably, the commentary providing a framework for the sermon. So Anabaptist and monastic abuses are condemned in both media, and both cite pagan wisdom to teach Christians. The commentary quotes a Pythagorean proverb, "All things are common among friends," while the sermon, naming no philosophical school, adduces what seems more of a Stoic commonplace, the universal affinity (*parentage*) between the whole human race.³⁷ Pagans rebuke Christians in recognizing that "no one is born for oneself," and that neighbours must assist each other. Calvin's final word in the sermon is one of appreciation of the *si grandes foundations* for this service that were laid in the ancient church.³⁸

This topic leads us appropriately to Acts 6:1-6, "the creation of deacons," as Calvin unambiguously puts it at the beginning of the commentary's treatment.³⁹ Of his two sermons on the passage the first is devoted almost entirely to the nature of the deacon's office. It was delivered on August 10, 1550, and the following day a new hospitaller was elected in Geneva, to fill a vacancy caused by death among the second rank of deacons, according to the twofold distinction Calvin discerned in Romans 12:8. One brief allusion to the imminent election may be recognizable

³⁵2 8, 48/36 – 49/3.

³⁶SC8, 49/11-15.

³⁷CO 48, 60; CORII/12/1, 90; SC8, 51/33 – 52/4 (with n. 35 on 51-2).

³⁸SC8, 52/5-6.

³⁹CO 48, 117; CORII/12/1, 162.

in the sermon.⁴⁰ The two kinds of deacons are clearly differentiated, whereas the commentary is silent on the point, referring readers to the *Institutes* specifically on the contrast between deacons as properly *oeconomi pauperum* and the papists' liturgical functionaries, but no doubt implicitly on the two types of deacon also.⁴¹ Another allusion to the Geneva situation may be evident in Calvin's insistence that the diaconate is a spiritual office, not a secular one. In reality, as Robert Kingdon has shown, Geneva's deacons were city officials in charge of a range of social welfare services. In support of his point, Calvin cites the fact that in the early church the deacons gave the cup in the Lord's supper, and were thus associated with the ministers of the Word in the leadership of the church. Approving of what happened in the ancient church in the sermon while disapproving in the commentary of the papacy's deacons' handling of the plate and cup is not quite the inconsistency it might seem, for Calvin insists that in the early centuries the deacons retained their proper task of caring for the poor.⁴² Certainly Calvin the preacher knows no constraint in ridiculing the place of the deacons in the Roman church's "sacred hierarchy," as it is called.⁴³ As so often in these sermons, critique of the papacy is more extended, more sharply barbed and more gross than in the commentary, from which, however, it is by no means absent.

In his sermon, in vindication of the deacons' office as consecrated to God, Calvin cites the laying on of hands that they received. "The apostles observed this order, and even today it would not be a bad thing if we had this ceremony. For while we reject superstitions and human inventions, we don't despise what is of God and his apostles."⁴⁴ This is a friendlier assessment than the cool commentary can muster on this issue.

This first sermon, then, is wholly taken up with a commendation of the position of deacon, in line with, but more fulsomely than, the commentary. The second sermon starts likewise at the beginning of chapter 6, spending a third of its time on the grumbling of the Greek widows stirred up by the devil and jealousy as the believers' ranks multiplied. Calvin then explains the meaning of "disciple." The difference between true and false disciples is that the former have sat in Christ's school. Although not all can be teachers (*docteurs*), Isaiah's word cannot lie, "All shall be taught of God." This discussion of "disciple" and citation of Isaiah 54:13 appear in the commentary only in the 1560 enlarged edition – which suggests that one way in which Calvin determined the additions to be made was to read his sermons.⁴⁵

⁴⁰SC8, 204/1 with n. 1.

⁴¹SC8, 198/5 ff; CO 48, 120; CORII/12/1, 165-6.

⁴²SC8, 200/10-18' c.f R.M. Kingdon, 'Social Welfare in Calvin's Geneva', *American Historical Review* 76 (1971), 50-69.

⁴³SC8, 201/4-15.

⁴⁴SC8, 200/21-4.

⁴⁵SC8, 209/7-24; CO 48, 119; CORII/12/1, 164.

"It is not good that we leave off the Word of God and serve tables" (Acts 6:2). This statement by the apostles caused Calvin more bother than it should. Both preaching and commenting, he is anxious to exclude the misinterpretation that their ministry of the Word had in fact been neglected. As the commentary puts it, "It seems that these words of theirs were spoken *intempestive*, inopportuno," for they had in reality been coping with both the Word and the tables.⁴⁶ One may also discern in the commentary a minor concern lest the care of the needy might appear to be belittled. Indeed, it is because "We know what a holy thing it is to look after the poor" that, "when the apostles put the preaching of the gospel first, we infer ... that no obedience is more pleasing to God than this."⁴⁷ The disciplined economy of the commentary is evident in dealing with the ministry of the Word only in this context of priorities. It is, however, remarkable that when the commentary comes to verse 4, "We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word," its exposition is almost entirely given over to prayer. Pastors have "special reasons for praying" and like Moses must be "standard-bearers" in it.⁴⁸

We noted earlier part of the sermon's response to the worrying implication that the apostles had been negligent in service of the Word of God – namely, that, while Ananias and Sapphira were being dealt with, the apostles kept the faithful occupied with evangelical teaching for three hours or more. Calvin puts into the mouths of the apostles an amplification of what they said to the disciples.⁴⁹ He then proceeds to enlarge on the dignity and power of preaching. "There is nothing that God holds in such high regard as the preaching of the gospel. For it is his *royaulme* – his royal sceptre, kingly power – by which he seeks to reign (*dominer*) in this world. It is the means of bringing men and women to salvation."⁵⁰ The continuation of the sermon unfolds what this will entail in perseverance and in prayer.

Even the apostles acknowledged the demands preaching made upon them: "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Cor. 2:16). Calvin paraphrases and expands Paul's counsel to Timothy, and as he spells out the criteria that preaching must fulfil, especially application to the here and now, he moves into apologia for his own preaching and ministry in Geneva. "There are many who would like me to preach with my eyes closed, without regard for where I am – in what place, at what time" – as though the prophets and the apostles in their day did not target scandals and vices as he had been doing.⁵¹

⁴⁶CO 48, 119; COR II/12/1, 165.

⁴⁷CO 48, 120; COR II/12/1, 165.

⁴⁸CO 48, 121; COR II/12/1, 167.

⁴⁹SC 8, 210/23-31.

⁵⁰SC 8, 210/35-7.

⁵¹SC 8, 212/17-18. See also my essay, "The Four Forms of Calvin's Spoken Service of the Word of God, and his Sermons on Acts 1-7", in David Wright and David Stay (eds), *Serving the Word of God. Celebrating the Life and Ministry of James Philip* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, and Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2002), 219-32, at 231-2.

Here Calvin resumes contact with Acts 6: preaching is of such supreme importance that no mortal dare presume to undertake it while impeded by other commitments. Invoking Paul very loosely, he likens preachers to God's *gensdarmenie spirituelle*. Nothing must distract us from our calling.⁵² The summons throws into relief the mockery, even blasphemy, of God in this wretched papacy. Take the bishops, claiming to be successors of the apostles. The latter refused to let serving tables interfere with the Word of God, whereas bishops carry thousands upon thousands of responsibilities on their shoulders – three or four hundred parishes, to start with, and then temporal jurisdictions, usurping the magistrate's sword and authority, and also towns and palaces, principalities and territories. They have as much in common with the apostles as devils do with angels. They even wriggle out of serving a single soul at their own table, even though for thirteen centuries they had received a quarter of the offerings of the faithful to succour the poor, widows and orphans.⁵³ What then of preaching, if they cannot manage serving tables?

O, that's trivial stuff, they'll not deign to touch it. Their job is to apply chrism, dedicate and bless churches, baptize bells, consecrate vestments and church ornaments, bless organs and sound other trumpeting also. But preaching – that's for the friars.⁵⁴

The language descends to the brothel and the rattery.

Preachers of the gospel, by contrast, must learn to apply (*accommoder*) teaching as needed, announcing the Word not only in public but also person-to-person – or should it be translated “to the people at large and also to particular individuals” (*en public ... en particulier*)?⁵⁵

Elsewhere, too, in these sermons Calvin took opportunity to talk from one angle or another about preaching, preachers, hearers.⁵⁶ One more example must suffice. When Stephen quotes Deuteronomy 18:15, “God will raise up for you a prophet like me [Moses] from among your brethren,” Calvin's text reads also “Hear him,” the continuation in Deuteronomy itself. (The addition is found in Codex Bezae and is discussed by Erasmus.) The commentary on this verse, Acts 7:37, fastens solely on Christ as that promised prophet, while not excluding a reference to other prophets; they were “interpreters of the law, and the whole of their teaching was an appendix, as it were, to what Moses set forth.”⁵⁷ Calvin's sermon, on the other hand, majors on aspects of the communication of God's instruction through human agents.

⁵²SC8, 212/24–213/7.

⁵³SC8, 213/14–214/7, with nn. 28, 30 for the historical references.

⁵⁴SC8, 214/7-11.

⁵⁵SC8, 214/17-18.

⁵⁶See Wilhelmus H. Th. Moehn, ‘God Calls Us to His Service.’ *The Relation Between God and his Audience in Calvin's Sermons on Acts*, tr. G.W.L. Verburg-Balke (Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 345; Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2001).

⁵⁷CO 48, 149; CORII/12/1, 202.

“When it is said that we must hear those by whom God speaks to us” – notice how easily Calvin recasts the text – despite their being human, the reverence we must show to divine teaching is obvious. Moving to and fro between the prophets, Christ “the sovereign prophet” and contemporary preachers, Calvin discourses on “treasure in pots of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7).⁵⁸ Human messengers must be heeded like the Lord himself. “It is his will that his people be governed by the ministry of his Word. This order must be observed to the end of the world,” as Ephesians 4 tells us. If we refuse submission to the teaching of Christ, the devil will take over as our master. The devil’s two horns who demand to be given a hearing are Mohammed and the pope.⁵⁹

The sermon moves on to explain how in the next verse Stephen could describe Moses’ teaching as “living” when Paul called it a doctrine of death in 2 Corinthians 3:6-7.⁶⁰ At the end Calvin comes back to preaching in Geneva, to “what we proclaim every day.”

For when we preach, we do not say only “This is what God commands us,” but after saying that, we add that Jesus Christ has been given us from God the Father and that we participate in his Holy Spirit, so that we may be justified by grace. Thus the Holy Spirit has been given us through our Lord Jesus Christ, and daily this promise is made to us in the name of God, which we must accept by faith.⁶¹

This passage is a neat illustration of how readily Calvin slips into a Trinitarian pattern of instruction, observable elsewhere in these Acts sermons.⁶²

In conclusion, I offer some reflections on two questions, our knowledge of Calvin, and our use of Calvin today, particularly in the ministry of the Word. The two are obviously connected.

I find myself repeatedly returning to the question how one may grasp the whole Calvin. How many different faces does Calvin wear? How many Calvins are there? None of us now dares expound Calvin from the *Institutes* alone. To do so would be to defy the guidance he himself has given us concerning the relationship between that work and his commentaries. We still have to struggle with these two Calvins. I advert solely to the issue of accommodation, on which I have done some explorations and on which Jon Balsarak is completing an Edinburgh doctoral thesis which will more sharply than ever expose the often awkward ramifications of this versatile motif in Calvin’s scriptural labours. Accommodation in the *Institutes* wears a rather *douce* face; in the Old Testament

⁵⁸SC8, 322/1, 321/17-18, and 322-5 *passim*.

⁵⁹SC8, 323/33-5, 321/24-5, 325/25-6.

⁶⁰SC8, 325/41 ff.

⁶¹SC8, 329/16-21.

⁶²Cf. SC8, 387/20 – 388/15, on Acts 7:55.

commentaries it is at times variously outrageous, bewildering or simply risqué. I am still chewing over a title to cap *The Unaccommodated Calvin*.⁶³

The most obvious impression made on me by this selective comparison of commentary and sermons is the economy of the former. A good decade after he set out his principles as a commentator Calvin kept to them in a highly disciplined fashion on Acts. There is in Calvin a huge gulf between the two genres. It is scarcely a doctrinal gulf, at least in this case; one would hardly expect it, in the two forms of exposition produced in the same year. From time to time the commentary on a verse or two seems clearly to have served as a cue, almost as agenda, for the preacher. Thus, when Peter on the day of Pentecost pled with his hearers to save themselves “from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:40), the commentary first explained the corruption of Jewish priests and scribes and then brought the exhortation up to date.

It would not be enough to have Christ set before us unless we were also taught to flee those things which lead us away from him. It is the task of a good shepherd to bar sheep from the onset of wolves. So today, in order to keep people in the pure teaching of the gospel, we are compelled often to show and testify how much the papacy differs from Christianity, and how poisonous a plague it is to be entangled with the perfidious enemies of Christ.⁶⁴

That is precisely what we observe Calvin doing in the pulpit, not only in dealing with this particular verse, at considerable length, but also frequently in this year and more of sermons on Acts. In the commentary Calvin says that Peter is not to be charged with abuse for calling a spade a spade.⁶⁵ In the sermon, he has to fend off accusations of excessive harshness against himself: “There’s no need to bawl out the pope and his people and call them ‘Antichrist’.”⁶⁶

Yet if the lucid brevity of the commentary is programmatic for the preacher, the latter nearly always exceeded its bounds by some distance. What we learn from this particular *extra Calvinisticum* (!) are Calvin’s pastoral preoccupations, his assessments of the progress – always so limited, except in externals – of the Reformation in Geneva, the centre, or centres, of gravity of contemporary conflict in the community, the continuing pull of the old religion, and consequently his priorities as servant of the Word of God. I am leaving on one side what we learn from the sermons about Genevan society, late medieval Catholicism, the vernacular French language, popular proverbial wisdom,⁶⁷ and much more.

⁶³By Richard Muller (New York: Oxford University Press,).

⁶⁴CO 48, 56; COR II/12/1, 86; tr. Fraser and McDonald (see n. 3 above), 84, altered.

⁶⁵“Peter is not to be charged with abuse for calling the reverend fathers who had the routine government of the church in their hands at that day a ‘corrupt generation’”; *ibid*.

⁶⁶C 8, 35/1-2.

⁶⁷See the Index of Proverbs and Proverbial Wisdom in SC 8, 414-17.

Is this not another Calvin, as different from the commentator Calvin as the latter is at times from the author of the *Institutes*?⁶⁸ No doubt the difference requires much more extensive and careful explication, which is not assisted by the relatively greater inaccessibility of the sermons compared with the commentaries. One has to ask how far our understanding of Calvin in the English-speaking world has been skewed by the achievement of the Calvin Translation Society in the mid-nineteenth century in making available in English only his commentaries (in which, of course, he uses the King James Version!), and not his sermons.

A final question under this head about our knowledge of Calvin: how do we rank the differing presentations of Calvin – to which no doubt others than the three I have identified should be added? Does the *Institutes* have pride of place, followed by the commentaries and then the sermons? This would reflect the *ordo studiorum* for most students of Calvin, but it is not in most people's experience a reasoned order. Much depends on one's particular interest in Calvin. The sequence, or ranking, from the *Institutes* to the sermons represents a move from the least locally contextualized to the most locally contextualized. For the reform in Geneva the sermons must be the most significant presentation of Calvin of the three. In understanding Calvin's European influence the other two would be more important. But if one was aiming, as I suppose we all aspire, at a full-orbed grasp of Calvin as, say, interpreter of Scripture (*servus verbi Dei*), doctor of the church, theological pastor, which would come first?

At this open-ended point I pass on to my second concluding reflection, on our contemporary use of Calvin. I have preachers, Bible teachers, and pastors especially in mind. It is often asserted to their credit that Calvin's commentaries remain by far the most serviceable corpus of its kind from the sixteenth century. Many a Presbyterian or Reformed pastor must use them regularly in preparing sermons. This dependence on commentaries (Calvin's and many others') by preachers must be partly responsible for a style of expository preaching fashionable in parts of Britain which issues in sermons that are nearer to rhetorical exegetical lectures than anything else. They appeal to the practice of Calvin and others in preaching right through books of the Bible by *continua lectio*, but they are deficient above all in that earthing in the soil of locality, in grappling with local, even individual or group, abuses and scandals, in addressing the concerns of the day or the hour, in preaching, as Calvin would put it, with their eyes open, open to time, place and situation. Application is the common term for what is missing or woefully weak. I wonder

⁶⁸Willem van 't Spijker raises the question whether we are confronted with four Calvins – dogmatist, exegete, polemicist and pastor – but reminds us that Calvin was one man: "Foreword" to Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, tr. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, Leicester: Apollon, 1994), 7-8. Note also T.H.L. Parker's comments on the reception given to his 1947 introduction to Calvin's preaching, *The Oracles of God: Calvin's Preaching* (see n. 4 above), vii.

how far excessive reliance on commentaries may be responsible. Of course from this vantage point there are commentaries and commentaries.

Let me prescribe instead for preachers Calvin's sermons. Of course their particular applied elements cannot be replicated, simply because they belong to mid-sixteenth-century Geneva. But their general applied character as a vivid, vigorous, colourful, contemporary service of God's Word must be emulated. Calvin the commentator is prim and proper, all buttoned-up. Calvin the preacher may not let his hair down, but there is freer rein for his imagination, even for creativity, in the pastoral or polemical targeting of the Word. "We must touch people on the quick (*toucher au vif*) in order to uproot what Satan has planted."⁶⁹

⁶⁹SC 8, 34/6-7.