

CALVIN'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR EVANGELISM TODAY

Merwyn Johnson

What is Calvin's significance for evangelism today? The question entails getting the worlds of sixteenth-century Calvin and twentieth-century Calvin scholarship to touch upon the world of modern evangelism—a monumental task at any point. To address the question without bogging down in details, I propose to look at five interactive theses drawn from Calvin's theology, which bear upon the way evangelism is conceived and practiced in the Reformed churches/tradition. All five theses have to do with the grace of God, so a fitting subtitle to these remarks would be "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of Calvin." The presentation will show that Calvin's view of grace would alter significantly our current vision and practice of evangelism.

We should mention as well that each thesis deserves full-length treatment. One or two may be contested. Some relevant theses may be missing. All of them may be taken as an agenda for further study or reflection, some more than others. As a group, however, these themes represent some of the most exciting and relevant insights of Calvin for our time, especially in the Reformed tradition.

Why should we emphasize the priority of grace when talking about evangelism? Modern Protestants typically set the agenda for evangelism in terms of Paul and the Philippian jailer. "What must I do to be saved?" asks the jailer. To which Paul replies: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31). The aim of evangelism here is to get every human being on the face of the earth to pose that question and accept that answer, as the Philippian jailer did, to the salvation of himself and his household (Acts 16:32-34).¹ Following this agenda, the evangelist helps the unbeliever calculate the benefits (advantages or rewards) of being saved and the risks (losses or punishments) of not being saved—a blatant appeal to the individual's self-interest. The evangelist has to motivate the unbeliever to reject the risk and cling to the avenue of salvation, namely, believing in Jesus Christ and faithfully living out the Christian life—all of which requires step-by-step procedures, techniques, heavy rhetoric, and may even resort to manipulation in order to obtain the unbeliever's "decision for Christ." And since in the end the believer has to do it all—repent, believe, and live it out—naturally he/she is going to take credit (or blame) for whatever is done. Grace here is a means or an opportunity but not the salvation itself.

Calvin's accent on grace reverses all that. According to Calvin's view of grace, God alone saves and God alone does the work of evangelism. Grace proclaims the redeeming presence and activity of *God* in our midst. Our relationship with God is alive and valuable for its own sake because *God* is alive, active, and gracious. Grace thereby disrupts human calculations about benefits and self-interest and sidesteps our domestications of God to routines or rituals, to patterns of manipulation or technique, or to programs which we can manage. The accent on grace preserves the *integrity* of our relationship with God in the activity of evangelism, guarantees that evangelism really is the work of God, and yet gives to the evangelist the joy of vigorously participating in God's work.

Thesis 1: Grace, according to Calvin, breaks through the limits of our "natural knowledge and brings Christians to a clear, authentic knowledge of God.

This thesis builds on the important work of Edward Dowey in highlighting the contrast between the knowledge of God as Creator and the knowledge of God as Redeemer in Calvin's thought.² The *Institutes* begin with a concern for the knowledge of God, which is crucial to humanity because of who God is and what God does on our behalf. "Not only does [God] sustain this universe (as he once founded it) by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment, bear with it in his mercy, watch over it by his protection; but also that no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause" (1.2.1).³ On the face of it, One so central to human existence deserves our complete devotion and service, or piety, as Calvin puts it (1.2.1-2).

But how shall we know God? The knowledge of God as Godself is not available to humankind: God is incomprehensible to finite minds (1.2.2., 1.13.1). We need a "useful" knowledge of God, which reflects God's bearing toward us and our proper fealty to God (1.2.2). Calvin uses the words "benefits" and "advantage" (1.2.1) to talk about the knowledge of God, but not to calculate human self-interest. As he says, "even if there were no hell, [the pious mind] would still shudder at offending him alone" (1.2.2): God's presence and majesty are great and imposing in themselves. They are like the brilliance of the sun at midday. They illumine the landscape of our lives utterly, and make all lesser lights look like shadows (1.1.2-3).

Here enters for Calvin the knowledge of God as Creator which should be readily available to humanity, "if Adam had remained upright" (1.2.1). Every person has an innate sense of divinity, he says.⁴ The whole universe is "a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God" and in which God "daily discloses himself" (1.5.1).⁵ The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are likewise primary sources for the knowledge of God as Creator (1.6.1).⁶ In the hands of sinful human beings, however, none of these sources of the knowledge of God works out by itself. Sinners that we are, we fixate upon the means of revelation, elevating our own knowledge and the means of our knowledge into a substitute for the very God whom we seek to know. The result in every instance is idolatry,⁷ an utterly perverse and confused knowledge of God, and a trap from which we cannot extricate ourselves. The harder we try to know God under such circumstances, the more we project substitutes for God, deepen our sin, and misguide our own piety. And the more we try to extricate ourselves from this dilemma, the worse we make it.⁸

The knowledge of God as Creator, then, must give way to a knowledge of God as Redeemer, which in turn becomes for us an entree into the knowledge of God as Creator. That is exactly what Calvin says: "In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us" (1.2.1)⁹ Faith and life in Christ¹⁰ supplant the innate sense of divinity and the wisdom of creation as the principal avenue to the knowledge of God as Creator. Even the Scriptures do not stand alone. They convey the knowledge of God first as they are referred to Jesus Christ and then confirmed by the Holy Spirit. "If through the Spirit it [the letter of the law/Scripture—m.j.] is really branded upon hearts, if it shows forth Christ, it is the word of life 'converting souls, . . . giving wisdom to little ones,' etc." (1.9.3).¹¹

The knowledge of God in any useful sense, then, depends upon the knowledge of God as Redeemer. The knowledge of God as Creator becomes accessible to the believer, but only as an interpreted knowledge. By the grace of redeeming faith the Christian can see God present and active in oneself, in creation, in the Scriptures, and in providence. The pious person who knows God by faith will search for God's gracious presence, purposes, and activity in every phase of life, in order to serve God with the whole self.¹²

The impact of these reflections on evangelism is twofold. The saving knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ is indeed the aim of evangelism. This knowledge, however, is the key to the further knowledge of God in the world around us, in the situations of life, in the events of history. Just as the saving knowledge of God is not automatic—God gives us the faith with which to believe and know—so also the knowledge of God in the world around us is not obvious or self-standing. It has to be won in the exercise of faith, in the search for the meaning of the Scriptures, and in the constant engagement with life (and these are not independent of one another). In each of these we look for the signs of God's presence, activity, and ongoing graciousness, and we remain alert to our own place therein. Evangelism, then, seeks to restore a living relationship with the living God, whom to know is to love and to serve.

II

Thesis 2: Calvin's elaboration of grace rejects a sequence of justification and repentance.

Thesis 2 draws on Calvin's treatment of repentance and justification in Book Three of the *Institutes*.¹³ Should these be put in a sequence, one before the other? Can they be put in a row without detriment? The sequence is there in the ordering of the material (repentance before justification), and there is strong evidence that during the later stages of the Reformation—certainly from pietism (eighteenth century) till today—a sequence has developed to help ministers and members proceed in "the spiritual care of souls."¹⁴ Calvin anticipates most of these and rejects them out of hand.

Let's be specific about the orderings he rejects:

(1) that repentance or regeneration precedes faith (3.3.1-2), and that the faith by which we are justified is followed by the works of the Christian life by which we are sanctified (= the righteousness of faith followed by the righteousness of works—3.11.13-20);

(2) that justification brings with it an "essential righteousness" which belongs to him/her, so that thereafter the Christian cannot sin any longer (3.11.5-12); *or* (what is the same thing) that having been freed from the burden and curse of sin, the Christian is now a righteous person and enabled to do good works out of him/herself (3.11.13-14 and 23); *or* (what is the same thing) that having been justified by grace, which is God's action, we are to sanctify ourselves, which is our proper human response (3.14.5-6, 9-17; 2.2.6);

(3) that the righteousness of faith ever gives way to the righteousness of works (3.11.13-20).

For Calvin "the sum of the gospel" is repentance and the forgiveness of sins (3.3.1 and 19; cf. 3.11.1), or justification and repentance. We do not have one of these without the other. Repentance for Calvin embraces both regeneration and sanctification, the

beginning of and the progress toward "actual holiness of life" (3.3.1), though he does not thereby exclude sudden conversions (3.3.18). Repentance is "regeneration," says Calvin, "whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam's transgression (3.3.8). Justification, on the other hand, has to do with pardoning our sins and imputing to us undeserving sinners the righteousness established by Jesus Christ (3.11.2-4). While Calvin does discuss repentance before justification because "reason and the order of teaching demand" it (3.3.1), he makes plain that justification is "the main hinge on which religion turns" (3.11.1).

Nonetheless, Calvin rules out any ordering of justification and repentance one before the other, at three specific points. He insists, first, that faith precedes repentance. While Jesus and John the Baptist both call the people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2), they base their appeal on the prior reality of the kingdom of God come near (3.3.1). That prior reality, says Calvin, corresponds to the dawning of faith in the life of the Christian (3.2.19). The very dynamic of repentance is at stake here: "A man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace" (3.3.2). Just like justification, then, repentance issues from faith.

Second, all three of these items—faith, justification, and repentance—are gifts from God, not accomplishments by human beings. "Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit," says Calvin (3.1.4). The Spirit doesn't believe in place of us, but gives us the faith with which to believe, and the *Spirit's* power—not any power intrinsic to the activity of believing—uses that believing to unite us with Jesus Christ and all his benefits (3.1.1-4). Calvin confirms the gift character of faith by elaborating the gift character of justification and repentance. He never tires of showing how futile our human efforts are at establishing any justifiable standing before God. Justification is simply "unmerited righteousness . . . conferred upon us as a gift of God" (3.13.3). Likewise "repentance is a singular gift of God" (3.3.21), a sign of *God's* work of regeneration. Our "good works" do not receive their goodness from us, sinners that we are (and continue to be); they are gifts of participation in the ongoing life and activity of God (3.14.20-21).

Third, Calvin regards both justification and repentance as continuous processes, each one paralleling the other. We might expect that of repentance as steady progress towards holiness and purity over a lifetime (3.3.9-15). Calvin is explicit about justification as a process as well (3.14.10-12). Justification covers the sins we have committed, and pardons them completely. But if we continue to sin—as Calvin and Paul affirm—then we have need of continuing forgiveness. At stake here is not whether Christ died for our sins once and for all, but whether the just shall live by faith daily. If justification is once and for all, doesn't it wind up justifying more than the sinner, namely, his/her later sins? But we still need to ask forgiveness for sins we commit. If, on the other hand, justification is not once and for all, won't believers need a little "help" in the form of grace from the sacramental system or maintaining themselves in good works? Calvin wants to affirm that the righteousness of Christ is all the righteousness we will ever have before God, and we receive it by the continuous gift of faith (3.14.11).

Justification and repentance obviously come together in faith for Calvin. Both proceed from faith and do so continuously; like faith, both are gifts. They are, simply put, the elaborated meaning of faith, for Calvin. They also come together in a yet more profound way in terms of our union with Christ. Just as faith unites us with Christ and all his benefits (3.1.1-4), so also justification and repentance spell out our union with Christ. United with Christ, we share the remission of our sins obtained by him and the righteous-

ness of his obedient life imputed to us: Sinners that we are, we will never attain any goodness of our own; the righteousness of Christ is all the righteousness we will ever have. United with Christ, we share in his death, resurrection, and ongoing life as we mortify our sinful selves and as we are enlivened to love and serve God. For Calvin our union with Christ takes precedence over all attempts to divide, split up, and spread out the steps of our salvation.¹⁵

What impact does it have on evangelism to reject a sequence of justification and sanctification, one before the other? Rejecting the sequence, we avoid reducing spiritual formation and growth to manageable, step-by-step procedures and techniques. Such procedures domesticate God utterly and lend themselves to abuse by (still) sinful, if well-intentioned believers. Perhaps worst of all, they encourage us to believe that if we just follow the right steps, we can become (or engender) "good" Christians automatically. Grace properly disappoints us on that score and disrupts our procedures and techniques. Equally important for evangelism, however, on this issue Calvin focuses our attention upon Christ, who *Christ* is, what *Christ* does to redeem us, and what we become when we are united with him by grace.

III

Thesis 3: Calvin's accent on grace in predestination transforms the formula of righteousness, rewards and punishments, saved and lost.

The importance of predestination for evangelism should not be underestimated. Says Calvin: "We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election" (3:21.1). Calvin scholars recognize generally that predestination is not his starting point in theology: His treatment of it, after all, comes late in Book III, after he has dealt with the topics of revelation, Trinity, creation, sin, law/gospel, Christology, regeneration, and justification. Nonetheless, there is a climactic quality about predestination for Calvin: In some sense the subject caps the whole argument of the *Institutes* thus far.

Not accidentally, Calvin spends much of his attention on establishing God's *righteousness* in election.¹⁶ "God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness," he says, "that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous" (3.23.2). Calvin backs off from saying that God's will is right because God's might makes it so: "The will of God is not only free of all fault but is the highest rule of perfection, and even the law of all laws" (3.23.2). He adds repeatedly (and emphatically) that human beings are presumptuous to think they can understand or judge the standards of God's righteousness (3.23.2).

The concern about righteousness in predestination recalls other things Calvin has said earlier: The very presence of God is majestic, imposing, and fearful, not to say overwhelming, precisely because God who is righteous demands righteousness of sinful human beings.¹⁷ The formula of righteousness is there for all to see: Neither ignorance nor sin is any excuse.¹⁸ God loves righteousness and hates wickedness. God promises to reward righteous behavior and punish unrighteous behavior. God vows to mete out to human beings exactly what they deserve: blessings for goodness and curses for evil, the promise of eternal life for a life of perfect righteousness and the threat of eternal perdition for a life of sin and rebellion against God (2.8.2). What more could human beings ask for? God, who establishes righteousness in the earth, writes it on the hearts of all human beings,

and stands behind it, will measure out to every human being what he/she is due according to the formula of righteousness.

Notice that both sides of election appear to be present in the formula of righteousness: the saved who are accounted righteous before God and the damned who are accounted unrighteous. The formula declares up front that each person will get just what he/she deserves. The formula is still engaged when human sin rears its ugly head. The Bible says many times over that a sin against the law of righteousness at any one point violates the whole law.¹⁹ Only if a person does not sin a single time can he/she expect to enter into eternal life with God. For the rest of humanity—according to the formula of righteousness—punishment and damnation must be considered just and fair, certainly not arbitrary or unexpected. If no human being stands before God sinless, God has no one to reward and everyone to punish.

The question must be raised whether God is *unrighteous, unjust, unfair, or arbitrary* to reward some obvious sinners who don't deserve it. "Reward," of course, is no longer a fitting expression, is it? For anyone who is united with Christ, accounted righteous on his account, and drawn into eternal life with God receives this destiny as a *gift*, unearned and undeserved.²⁰ But is God unrighteous, unjust, unfair, or arbitrary in such instances? Or is God simply being gracious, rising to a higher level of righteousness which cannot be penetrated by the human mind or reduced to the original formula of righteousness? Calvin affirms the latter: "In his mere generosity [God] has not been bound by any laws but is free" (3.21.6). And again: "With respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth" (3.21.7).

Is God then obligated to extend the same grace of salvation to everyone? Not on the face of it. In relation to the lost the formula of righteousness remains righteous, just, and fair, not in the least arbitrary; and God remains above all gracious (3.21.6). To reassert here the issue of whether God is fair or just to save some and condemn others merely re-erects the formula of righteousness at the level of grace. It insists that everyone has an opportunity to answer the question, "What must I do to be *saved/not lost*?"—which returns the whole matter to the level of the formula of righteousness and denies the distinctive operation of grace. Retaining the accent on grace, Calvin reaches a crescendo in his theology.

What impact does Calvin's treatment of predestination have upon evangelism today? Probably nowhere have we in the Reformed churches short-changed ourselves more than in losing sight of the significance of election, precisely for evangelism. Let us consider five items. First, predestination leads us to focus evangelism on the utter graciousness of God. Salvation cannot be earned, bought, achieved, manipulated, programmed, or controlled by any human being. To appeal to or calculate rewards and punishments, the pleasures of heaven and the pains of hell, is seriously misleading—unless they are used to bring out the futility of such self-seeking. God alone saves, and God saves by grace alone without regard to the worth or works of any human being.

Second, predestination takes place in Christ alone, who gives to election its historical dimensions and experience (so Calvin, 3.24.5). No one is elect except in Jesus Christ. Nothing about predestination sets aside or bypasses redemption through Christ. Our union with Christ—the mark of election—is important to us for its own sake: Christ alone turns our heads to God and brings authentic knowledge of God. Christ alone provides us a profound participation in God's ongoing presence and activity. Through Christ alone, electing grace accounts us righteous and purifies our lives. By tracing our union with Christ

back to election, we can see our faith and live in Christ as the unmistakable gifts they are. *Grace* stands our world on its head, and *grace* leads us into adventures that reach the heights of joy and the depths of human tragedy—for which the rewards and punishments scarcely fit.

Third, predestination makes us truly *humble* before the matter of grace and salvation. both the work of saving and the knowledge of who is saved belong to God. God grants to the evangelist a participation in what God is doing: That makes bearing witness to the love, presence, and grace of God a joy and a privilege. The results are God's as well, which releases us from the impossible burden of accomplishing what only God can do. Beyond our own faith and the signs of grace at work in people around us, we do not know who is saved and who isn't: That gives us a good hope for all people (3.23.14),²¹ including those who seem the least receptive, and encourages us to keep loving, believing, and hoping in what God can do.

Fourth, predestination leads us to identify with other people in terms of our common sinfulness. Before God we are sinners like everyone else, albeit forgiven sinners. Grace actually makes us more keenly aware of our sin and the need for grace. But then we do not separate people into groups of lost and saved, good and bad. We who are sinners are simply led to share God's grace with fellow sinners, and invite them into the fellowship of forgiven sinners to do the same.

Fifth, all of the foregoing should lead us to redouble our efforts in evangelism. For if God is at work spreading grace among the sinners, then we sinners want to be where the gracious God is at work. Participating in the activity of God is the joy of our salvation: Evangelism, like the Christian life, becomes a crucial and vigorous exercise of our piety, by the grace of God.

IV

Thesis 4: Calvin's preference for grace signals an overall emphasis on an order of redemption.

The thesis here²² says that Calvin's own theological starting point was the gospel, redemption in Christ, and a pervasive emphasis on grace, which emerges in an order of redemption.²³ For twenty-three years (since 1535-36), the successive editions of the *Institutes* started with a gospel focus, and the 1559 edition does not reverse that accent at the last moment. The theses we considered earlier, if correct, draw from Calvin's mature theology and reinforce the thesis here. For Calvin the Christian must know God as redeemer before he/she can know God as creator (Thesis 1). Union with Christ and his accomplishments is the focal point of the biblical witness concerning salvation for every Christian (Thesis 2). Salvation comes by God's grace alone without any regard for the worth or works of any human being except Jesus Christ (Thesis 3). To these weighty points we may add another: Calvin prefers to say that *grace* leads us to the knowledge of our sin.

At the beginning of the *Institutes* in every edition (1.1-2) Calvin speaks about the reciprocity of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. We do not know God unless we know ourselves. Some knowledge of God comes through even in our degradation.²⁴ And the knowledge of ourselves in our misery leads us to seek God.²⁵ The weight of Calvin's treatment, however, lies plainly on the other side: We do not know ourselves with any clarity or depth until we attain a knowledge of God and "descend" from contemplating god to scrutinizing ourselves (1.1.2). The majesty and righteousness of God are like the brilliance of the sun at midday: They illumine the landscape of our lives utterly

and make all lesser lights look like shadows (1.1.2-3). We can only be humbled by such knowledge, recognizing our darkness, our wickedness, and our unworthiness before God.²⁶

Calvin reinforces this underlying insight at a couple of points. He speaks of the knowledge of ourselves in terms of "what we were given at creation" prior to the Fall (2.1.1). For sinners, however, such knowledge is available only through Christ, "the image of God restored" (1.15.4), and from the vantage point of redemption, the image of God restored in us (2.3.6-14).

Secondly, Calvin mentions the judgment of God and the law of righteousness as items which should make the sinner tremble. He plainly couches these, however, in God's prior benevolence, mercy, and grace.²⁷ Faith, trusting in God's benevolence, must dawn first before the sinful human being will recognize God's claim over his/her life "by right of creation" (1.2.2) or the expectations of righteousness that come from God's righteous will.²⁸ As Calvin says, "For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service" (1.2.1). And Calvin defines faith, from which repentance proceeds, as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us" (3.2.7).

The law, or formula of righteousness, remains a crucial means to knowing our sin (2.7.21-11), but not so as to crush us,²⁹ which it would do if it were considered by itself. The grace that dawns in our lives with the beginning of faith allows us to view our sins and sinfulness as they are, with complete honesty. The same grace leads us to cling to the promises of God: to the mercy of forgiveness, the righteousness of Christ accomplished for us, and a love for God's presence that makes us want to repent of our unrighteousness sin by sin. By grace the same law provides important clues to God's presence and activity among us, which guides us in our Christian life.³⁰

Time and space don't permit us to delve into the order of redemption itself. The coming of Christ establishes the order of redemption: He initiates a kingdom over which he rules, a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), with a corresponding reversal of values ("the first will be last, and the last first," etc.). Calvin's treatment of the Christian life in terms of self-denial, cross-bearing, and serving the image of God in all people (3.6-10) is very much to the point. Fred Graham's treatment of Calvin's social agenda in Geneva is helpful as well.³¹

What does Calvin's preference for an order of redemption have to do with evangelism? The reciprocity of the knowledge of God and of ourselves is especially relevant. The stated pattern (the order of redemption) of Calvin—dare we call it a distinctively Reformed pattern?—starts from God's grace and moves then to identify human sin. The polar opposite pattern (the order of creation)—typical of most modern evangelism—identifies human sin first and then moves to present the alternatives of God's judgment and God's grace that bear upon our sin. The presumption here is that, as Calvin points out (1.1.2; 2.1.2f), immersed in our own sins we human beings can tell exactly what our sins really are. In modern times the whole issue has become a matter of crassly identifying *human problems* and *God's solutions* to them, or human *needs* and how God *satisfies* them, or human *questions* and how God *answers* them. The reality of sin has gotten lost in the shuffle.

In truth, of course, Calvin allows for both movements, and he uses both: from grace to sin, then from sin to grace again, making the knowledge of God and ourselves truly

reciprocal, but Calvin *starts* from grace to sin. He starts, that is, with the light of God's love which penetrates the darkness of our lives and loves us "while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:8). The love which thus accepts us serves as a mirror to reflect back to us the true reality of our situation now brought into the light of day. We see now what God sees of us, reflected in the very love of God for us. Feelings, attitudes, understandings, and actions which may have been appropriate in the darkness now turn out to be ugly, foolish, ignorant, malicious, small, etc., in broad daylight, in the presence of the One who loves us so.

To stand thus exposed burns like fire. The honesty is brutal and overwhelming, and throws us into a crisis: We will either begin to deal with our sin and unworthiness, or we will try to hide from the light and destroy its source. That's why the *offer* of God's love is not enough. Accepting the love of God itself requires a measure of grace, for us to quit clinging to our sinful selves and turn toward what we can become in the love of God (read: mercy, benevolence, gospel, grace, etc.). But notice that starting with grace and love does not lead us to be permissive about sin, nor allow us to ignore it. The dawning of grace throws us into a crisis of seeing things as they are, including first among them our unworthiness to receive such love and the ugliness of our sin. At the moment of such realization, we are forced to deal with our sins one by one, as these are spotlighted by grace.³²

V

Thesis 5: Calvin's provision for the proclamation of grace, especially in the preaching of the Word, leads us to an ever deepening engagement in the situations of life.

We move now to Calvin's provisions for the church.³³ As Calvin says, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not to be doubted a church of God exists" (4.1.9). These marks of the church would be merely forms of Protestant ritual except for the promise they bear: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20, quoted by Calvin, *ibid.*). The promise of preaching and the sacraments is that Christ will be present and active in the midst of the worshipping congregation (cf. 4.3.1-4).

So said, the preaching of the Word recalls and builds on all the other theses we've considered herewith. From Thesis 1 we saw that authentic knowledge of God otherwise missed by sinners comes only by redemption through Christ and the gift of faith uniting us with him. The knowledge of God given in redemption, however, is extended and cultivated by the knowledge of God in Scripture and in creation. Both these points of knowledge are *interpreted* knowledge: The Scriptures have to be searched diligently, expounded, and heard for their gospel meaning. The current events of creation—providence by another name³⁴—have to be scrutinized for the signs of God's wisdom, purpose, presence, and activity here and now. And the two, the exercise of the Scriptures in the present time and the scrutiny of current events, have to be joined, so that by the Lord's own leading Christian people may live daily by faith, united with Christ and serving God in all matters.

From Thesis 2 we saw that Calvin deliberately shuns putting justification and sanctification into some kind of sequence in order to focus our primary attention on the grace of our union with Jesus Christ by faith. Justification and sanctification spell out the meaning of faith: They also make plain the meaning of our union with Christ. From our union with Christ come mercy and pardon for our sins—all the righteousness we will ever have. From our participation in Christ's dying and rising come our own best lives, but not

without struggle, doubt, real suffering, and genuine repentance for sins we commit. And we need to be continually stirred by God's forgiveness and regenerating work in our lives, no matter how painful, by the preaching of the Word.

From Thesis 3 we learned just how much our salvation really does depend upon God's gracious dealings with us. Following Paul, Calvin affirms that "it pleased God by the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).³⁵ Preaching is itself an order of humility: The aim is accomplished not by the native gifts of the preacher but by the power of the Spirit, who opens the hearts and minds of those who hear, unites them with Christ, and ushers them into the knowledge of God. Because God uses it so, preaching issues the call to redemption in Christ—and becomes the occasion of hardening the heart by the unbeliever (3.24.2, 5, 8, 13-14). The preacher at work thereby experiences first hand the joy of seeing God graciously at work in the lives of people but also the tragedy and brokenness of human beings living apart from God; he/she also experiences scorn, contempt, and rejection for Christ's sake. The courage to pick up and go on comes from the confidence that God is the author and finisher of our faith, and God will bring the work of grace to its completion.

From Thesis 4 the preacher takes the cue to proclaim the living, active, present love of God, and let God's love do its work. Tracing the signs of that love by faith, the preacher follows its penetrating rays through the hills and valleys of our lives. By grace we will not flinch at obstacles or shadows to that light, but will follow it into the depths of evil in our own hearts, into the haunts of injustice in our society, and into the anguish of innocent suffering. There we will faithfully discern what is appropriate to such a loving presence and what is not.

We arrive thus at Thesis 5. In fact, all four theses lead up to this one. Proclaiming God's grace leads of itself to an ever deepening engagement in the situations of life. The church and the church's preaching stand not at the rear watching life go by, not merely in a support or coaching role, not removed from the front line issues of our common life. *Grace* leads us to engage the issues of our lives precisely in the church's preaching. God forbid that preaching should ever become a mere ritual or routine, for preacher or for congregation. And God forbid that we should ever put the proclamation of God's grace only in the hands of the preacher. Like a dam that can no longer contain the flood waters that press against it, grace will always burst the bonds that try to hold it back.

What impact does Calvin's consideration of preaching have on evangelism today? Much of the foregoing speaks for itself.

Evangelism today doesn't require a particular form, like the big city revivals or a central pulpit surrounded by stained glass windows and cushioned pews. Nor does evangelism have to be reduced to a program or a set of procedures we can manage and control. Evangelism may not mean getting people to come to a ritual observance or to feed the organizational agenda of a local church. These are all places where the Reformed churches seem to be hung up today. The times are changing, however, and the forms of evangelism will have to change, too.

Our discussion does make clear a few critical elements for evangelism in the Reformed tradition: the Bible interpreted among the people for their understanding, engagement in the lives and situations of people today, imagination, pastoral sensitivity and follow through, and nerve. The priority of grace in Calvin's theology adds another dimension: the vision of *God's* evangelistic presence and activity among us. Grace

repeatedly breaks through all the ways we modern human beings try to tie down, domesticate, and manage God. Grace puts the music back in the dance of Christian living and evangelism!

As a footnote to this article, we need to mention the extraordinary evangelistic and mission efforts of the Geneva Church during Calvin's ministry. Calvin sought to reform the city of Geneva according to the Word of God. By consensus the social transformation of the city under Calvin was far-reaching and profound. Lesser known but equally important were the mission efforts. Geneva and Calvin attracted a horde of religious refugees from all over Europe. Many settled down in Geneva and stayed there. Many others prepared themselves under Calvin and returned to their native lands as evangelists and missionaries. John Knox is the best known of these; the largest number probably went to France; many became martyred. The "Register of the Company of Pastors" in Geneva, 1555-1562, names eighty-eight men who were sent out as missionaries from Geneva. Other records indicate that ten to twelve times that many were actually going out, and some as far away as Brazil.³⁶ Calvin's theology and evangelism, or missions, obviously went hand in hand.

The simple significance of John Calvin for evangelism today lies in his vision and practice of the gospel. Living by the gospel for Calvin entails being an evangelist. The Christian who is united with Christ by faith cannot exercise that faith without giving it away to others. The Christian who is drawn in to Christ's expansive love for humankind cannot continue in that love without spending him/herself in loving others. The Christian who hopes in the face of all adversity cannot endure without actively pointing others to the same hope. Evangelism, then, is not a luxury for the Reformed Christian, neither is it a program or a technique. Evangelism belongs to the essence of what it means to be a practicing Christian, by the grace of God.

Notes

¹The question and the answer are, of course, most frequently taken out of context and used in a way that ignores the sequence of the narrative. The jailer, for example, knows full well that Paul and Silas have "unusual powers," the demonstration of which has put them in jail, the part of jail reserved for the most dangerous offenders (cf. Acts 16:12-24). And when the earthquake opened all the cell doors and released all the shackles, the jailer was terrified, knowing that he was utterly helpless and undone (vv. 26-27). Only Paul prevented him from killing himself on the spot (v. 28). The jailer then prostrates himself at the feet of both Paul and Silas (v. 29) and addresses them as "Lords" (*kurioi*). The translations, universally it seems, translate *kurioi* here as a term of address ("Sirs," "Men"), which may have been typical of Gentile culture. This is borne out in the parables of Jesus (e.g., Luke 13:8, 14:22) and in the narratives of John (e.g., 4:11, 15, 19, 49; 5:7; 9:36; 12:21; 20:15). In the rest of Acts, however, *kurios* always refers to Jesus Christ, even as a term of address, and the term of address to other people is always *andres* (cf. 1:11; 2:14; 22, 37; 7:26; 13:16; 14:15; 19:35; 27:10, 21, 25; 28:17). Furthermore, the Book of Acts contains at least *three* instances in which either Peter (once) or Paul (twice) is taken as a god: 12:22; 14:8-18; and 28:6. Is the instance of the Philippian jailer a *fourth*?

What, then, is the prostrate jailer really asking? "Woe is me! I am undone! I am at your mercy. My life is in your hands: save my life if you can! I will do anything you ask!" This is scarcely a calm, reasoned question asking for steps to salvation, but a man pleading for his life; the circumstances have forced him to *put his trust in* (= *believe in*) *Paul and Silas as his saviors*. And what, then, is Paul really saying to this man? The accent falls not only what the jailer must do, for he is already doing that (prostrate, putting himself at the disposal of Paul and Silas), but upon the one in whom he must believe. "Believe," says Paul, "not in Silas and me as lords (*kurioi*), but in Jesus Christ as Lord (*kurios*), and salvation will come to you and your household." Whereupon Paul and Silas explain ("speak to him the word of the Lord," v. 32). Even if *kurioi* here is used as a form of address, the play on the word is unmistakable and must form part of the interpreted meaning of the passage. The recorded response of the jailer is not that of relief at a close call (which it was!), nor consternation at the trauma and inconvenience he has just experienced. His behavior is that of a humble and transformed man, who *rejoices* at having the privilege of believing in God—something that came to him out of the blue without any anticipation or expectation that it was coming (vv. 33-34).

Where, then, does evangelism take place in this passage? Is it in the question of the jailer and Paul's reply? Yes, but it is surely in much more beside: the work of God in the wondrous healing of the slave girl, in the earthquake which opens the shackles and the cell doors, in bringing together at this moment in time the lives of Paul/Silas and the Philippian jailer/family (notice that the miracle did not shield Paul and Silas from being beaten and thrown into prison), the witness of Paul and Silas to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the gift of faith to the jailer and his family.

²Edward a Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, second printing, 1965). See especially 41-49 on "The Duplex Cognitio Domini." "The redemptive revelation is actually the presupposition of the knowledge of the Creator which in Calvin's treatment precedes it," 46.

³All quotations are taken from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), and cited by book, chapter, and section number as indicated, whether in the text of the article or in a note.

⁴"There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity" (1.3.1). Chapters 3 and 4 of Book I are devoted to this phenomenon.

⁵Chapter 5 deals with the knowledge of God in creation; chapter 13 deals with what we learn about God from creation and Scripture; chapter 14 deals with what we learn about creation; chapter 15 with what we learn about humanity; and chapters 16-18 with what we learn about God's government of the universe, or providence.

⁶Calvin's expressed concern with Scripture in chapters 6-10 is for the knowledge of God as Creator. "It is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. . . . Here I shall discuss only how we should learn from Scripture that God, the Creator of the universe, can by sure marks be distinguished from all the throng of feigned gods. Then, in due order, that series will lead us to the redemption" (*1.6.1). The Scriptures also provide us with the knowledge of God as Redeemer, but that is not the focus of the chapters in Book I.

⁷1.4.1-3; 1.5.12; 1.7.1, 4-5; 1.8.13.

⁸The phenomenon here is identical with the dynamics of the law as Paul discusses it (see especially Galatians 3:1-4; Romans 3:19-31; 5:20; the whole of chapter 7; 10:4; and 1 Corinthians 15:56). Luther picked it up from Paul, and Calvin from Luther and Paul.

⁹The argument presented here is set forth in detail by Calvin in 2.6.1: Creation is properly the school of piety and the knowledge of God. Having sinned, human beings no longer have access to the knowledge of God through creation. Christ the Mediator gives sinners access to the wisdom of God through faith-knowledge, i.e., salvation.

¹⁰"Not only faith, perfect and in every way complete, but all right knowledge of God is born of obedience" (1.6.2).

¹¹The point is further confirmed by other places. Cf. Calvin's strenuous argument that the Word/Scripture says nothing to us except by the power of the Holy Spirit in 1.7.3-5, 1.8.13, 1.9.1-3. On the centrality of Jesus Christ to the meaning of the Scriptures cf. 1.13.7-13 (the connection between Christ and the Word), 2.6.1-4 (the centrality of Christ to the old and new covenants), 2.7.1-2 (the centrality of Christ to the law, taken as the "form of religion handed down by god through Moses"), 2.10.4 ("the Old Testament always had its end in Christ and in eternal life"), 3.1.1-4 (the work of the spirit in relation to Christ), 3.2.1. and 7 (the centrality of Christ for faith).

¹²See the enumeration of the "pious mind" in 1.2.2.

¹³See especially Book III, chapters 1-16.

¹⁴Examples come to mind like the contrition-confession-absolution-penance from the medieval (and modern Roman Catholic) sacrament of penance; or Luther's insistence upon preaching the law first to establish a person's sin and then the gospel to save them; or the pietistic sequence of conviction of sin-regeneration-faith-the Christian life; or Beza's adaptation of the biblical sequence, predestination-calling-justification-glorification from Romans 8:30, further elaborated by William Perkins in *A Golden Chain* (1590); or more recently James Fowler's stages in the development of faith, in *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). An entree into the matter is provided by C. Graafland, "Hat Calvin Einen Ordo Salutis Gelehrt?" in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1984), 221-246. Graafland's article is helpful but limited: He does not

pick up all the relevant material in Calvin, and at a certain point (from p. 232 on) tends to evolve into a discussion of God's agency versus human agency.

¹⁵The central importance of union with Christ is brought out well by Willem van 't Spijker in his excellent article "'Extra Nos' and 'In Nobis' by Calvin in a Pneumatological Light," in *Calvin and the Holy Spirit*, ed. Peter de Klerk (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1989), 39-69. He discusses the "ordo salutis" in Calvin on pages 51-52, confirming the view taken here.

¹⁶The primary treatment of election/predestination is in Book III, chapters 21-24. The sections on human sin (Book II, chapters 1-5) and justification (Book III, chapters 12-18) are also pertinent.

¹⁷See especially the language he uses in 1.1.2-3, 1.2.1-2, and his introduction to the exposition of the Ten commandments, 2.8.1-10.

¹⁸This goes back to the point made earlier that the knowledge of God is available, notably, in the innate human sense of divinity and in creation. In the Fall that knowledge is perverted not by God's action but by humanity's, so there is no excuse for sin among human beings, by blaming someone else for it (e.g., God, or Satan), or by ignorance.

¹⁹See, for example, Galatians 3:10, quoting from Deuteronomy 27:26; John 8:34; and James 2:10.

²⁰This is Calvin's argument specifically in 2.5.2 and the whole of chapter 18, Book III.

²¹So says Calvin in the heart of his treatment of predestination.

²²This thesis is scaled down from an earlier version, which said, "Calvin's preference for grace disrupts his own account of the biblical chronology of history and signals an overall emphasis on an order of redemption." The earlier thesis was too broad to deal with in the compass of this presentation/article, but is still worthy of investigation. The thesis raises the question whether Calvin's theology of grace—setting up an "order" of redemption corresponding with the kingdom of God initiated by Jesus Christ—disrupts the "order" of creation implicit in the traditional salvation history of the Apostles' Creed, which Calvin uses to organize the last edition of the *Institutes*. At stake is whether Jesus Christ introduces a new structure of existence altogether (a new creation in Christ, 2 Cor. 5:17) or simply puts the original creation back on track by removing the corruption of sin and restoring humanity to what God intended in the beginning (thereby subordinating Christ and redemption to creation).

²³The "order of redemption" stands over against the "order of creation" as a statement about the structure (= "order") of existence. These "orders" are to be distinguished further from the "order of salvation" discussed above under Thesis 2, which deals with the sequence of steps to salvation and the Christian life.

²⁴"Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God" (1.1.1).

²⁵"Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him" (*ibid.*).

²⁶The image of light also figures prominently in 3.12.2, and the whole of Chapter 12, Book III, where Calvin is reflecting on humanity before God's judgment seat.

²⁷See especially Calvin's description of the "pious mind" in 1.2.2, the introduction to the treatment of the Ten Commandments in 2.8.1-10. and the importance of knowing God's grace for repentance in 3.3.2.

²⁸See the whole section, 3.2.19, which reads in part: "When first even the least drop of faith is instilled in our minds, we begin to contemplate God's face, peaceful and calm and gracious toward us. . . . So we see that the mind, illumined by the knowledge of God, . . . is not hindered from enjoying a clear knowledge of the divine will toward itself. For what it discerns comprises the first and principal parts in faith. It is like a man who, shut up in a prison into which the sun's rays shine obliquely and half obscured through a rather narrow window, is indeed deprived of the full sight of the sun. Yet his eyes dwell on its steadfast brightness, and he receives its benefits. Thus, bound with the fetters of an earthly body, however much we are shadowed on every side with great darkness, we are nevertheless illumined as much as need be for firm assurance when, to show forth his mercy, the light of God sheds even a little of its radiance."

²⁹"Because it sees him to be a righteous judge, armed with severity to punish wickedness, it ever holds his judgment seat before its gaze, and through fear of him restrains itself from provoking his anger. And yet it is not so terrified by the awareness of his judgment as to wish to withdraw, even if some way of escape were open. But it embraces him no less as punisher of the wicked than as benefactor of the pious. . . . Besides, this mind restrains itself from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone; but, because it loves and reveres God as Father, it worships and adores him as Lord. Even if there were no hell, it would still shudder at offending him alone" (1.2.2).

³⁰This is the function of the so-called "third use of the law" for Calvin (2.7.12). The law as a reference to the presence, activity, and intention of God lies always close at hand for Calvin.

³¹W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972).

³²The issue deserves further treatment in terms of whether Calvin does this in his preaching.

³³The relevant sections here are Book IV, chapters 1-3 (on the church); Book I, chapters 16-18 (on providence); and 3.24.1-17 (on God's calling).

³⁴"Unless we pass on to his providence—however we may seem both to comprehend with the mind and to confess with the tongue—we do not yet properly grasp what it means to say: 'God is Creator'" (1.16.1).

³⁵The matter comes up in Calvin's defense of exhortation (3.23.13-1114) and in the emphasis on calling by the Word (3.24.1-2), both under the heading of election/predestination.

³⁶See Philip E. Hughes, "John Calvin: Director of Missions: in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 40-54. See especially page 46. See also R. Pierce Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," *ibid.*, 55-73.