

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Preacher of God's Word

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*A rule is prescribed to all God's servants that they bring not their own inventions, but simply deliver, as from hand to hand, what they have received from God.*¹

—JOHN CALVIN

Towering above the rooftops of the Old Town of Geneva rises the magnificent St. Peter's Church, the famed house of worship where John Calvin ministered during the heady days of the Reformation. Inside, the vaulted ceiling rises to a majestic height, spanning the entire length of the sanctuary. A feeling of transcendence fills the souls of those who enter. This former Roman Catholic bastion was transformed in 1536 into a Protestant fortress for biblical truth, becoming the epicenter of the Reformed world.

Atop a massive column encircled by a spiral staircase rests Calvin's pulpit. It was here, high above the stone floor of the sanctuary, that the Genevan Reformer stood Sunday by Sunday, even day by day, to proclaim the Word of God. This pulpit became a throne from which God's Word ruled, governing the hearts of those who joined the history-altering effort to reform the church.

Five hundred years after his birth, Calvin remains, arguably, the most influential preacher of God's Word that the world has ever witnessed. No man before him or since has been so prodigious in his handling of sacred Scripture. Calvin was many things—a world-class theologian, a revered exegete, a renowned teacher, an ecclesiastical statesman, an influential Reformer, and more. But as James Montgomery Boice notes, "Calvin was pre-eminently a preacher, and as a preacher he saw himself primarily as a Bible teacher."² Elsewhere Boice writes:



¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 1:43.

² James Montgomery Boice, foreword to John Calvin, *Sermons on Psalm 119 by John Calvin* (1580; repr. Aububon, N.J.: Old Paths Publications, 1996), viii.

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Calvin had no weapon but the Bible. From the very first, his emphasis had been on Bible teaching. Calvin preached from the Bible every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to be transformed. As the people of Geneva acquired knowledge of God’s Word and were changed by it, the city became, as John Knox called it later, a New Jerusalem.³

Given that Calvin’s preaching was so prolific, certain questions beg to be addressed: What kind of preacher was this remarkable man? How did he approach his sacred duty of expositing the Word of God? What were the distinctive features of his famed pulpit? I believe we can point to ten distinguishing marks of Calvin’s preaching.

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FOCUSING ON SCRIPTURE

First, *Calvin’s preaching was biblical in its substance*. The Reformer stood firmly on the chief cornerstone of the Reformation—*sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”). He believed the minister’s chief mandate was to preach the Word of God. Calvin writes that ministers’ “whole task is limited to the ministry of God’s Word; their whole wisdom to the knowledge of His Word; their whole eloquence, to its proclamation.”⁴ J. H. Merle D’Aubigné, the revered historian of the Reformation, notes, “In Calvin’s view, everything that had not for its foundation the Word of God was futile and ephemeral boast; and the man who did not lean on Scripture ought to be deprived of his title of honor.”⁵ The preacher, Calvin believed, has nothing to say apart from Scripture.

Restricting himself to Scripture, Calvin writes, “When we enter the pulpit, it is not so that we may bring our own dreams and fancies with us.”⁶ The Genevan Reformer was convinced that “as soon as men depart, even in the smallest degree from God’s Word, they cannot preach anything but falsehoods, vanities, impostures, errors, and deceits.”⁷ Calvin asserts, “A rule is prescribed to all God’s servants that they bring not their own inventions, but simply deliver, as from hand to hand, what they have received from God.”⁸ When the Bible speaks, he believed, God speaks. This was the unshakable foundation of Calvin’s preaching—the faithful exposition of Scripture.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), 83–84.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536 edition), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 195.

⁵ J. H. Merle D’Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin* (1880; repr. Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 2000), 7:85.

⁶ Quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 83.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 2:226–227.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:43.

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PREACHING THROUGH ENTIRE BOOKS

Second, *Calvin's preaching was sequential in its pattern.* For the duration of his ministry, Calvin's approach was to preach systematically through entire books of the Bible. "Sunday after Sunday, day after day, Calvin climbed up the steps into the pulpit," T. H. L. Parker writes. "There he patiently led his congregation verse by verse through book after book of the Bible."⁹ Calvin preached from the New Testament on Sunday mornings, from the New Testament or the Psalms on Sunday afternoons, and from the Old Testament every morning of the week, every other week. In this consecutive fashion, Calvin preached through most of the books of the Scriptures.

These expositions were protracted series, often lasting more than a year. During his Genevan pastorate, Calvin preached through the following Old Testament books: Genesis (123 sermons), Deuteronomy (201), Judges (a short series), 1 Samuel (107), 2 Samuel (87), 1 Kings (various sermons), Job (159), individual psalms (72), Psalm 119 (22), Isaiah (353), Jeremiah (91), Lamentations (25), Ezekiel (175), Daniel (47), Hosea (65), Joel (17), Amos (43), Obadiah (5), Jonah (6), Micah (28), Nahum (not recorded), and Zephaniah (17). For the most part, these Old Testament sermons were preached at 6 in the morning (7 during the winter months) each weekday, every other week, at St. Peter's Church.

In addition, Calvin preached through much of the New Testament, expounding its fullness and richness. During his ministry at Strasbourg, Calvin preached through the Gospel of John and Romans. In Geneva, he preached on a harmony of the Gospels (65 sermons, concluding when he died), Acts (189), 1 Corinthians (110), 2 Corinthians (66), Galatians (43), Ephesians (48), 1 and 2 Thessalonians (46), 1 Timothy (55), 2 Timothy (31), and Titus (17). This kind of exposition gave breadth to Calvin's preaching. No doctrine was left untaught, no sin unexposed, no promise undelivered.

BEGINNING IN A DIRECT MANNER

Third, *Calvin's preaching was direct in its message.* When expounding Scripture, Calvin was remarkably straightforward and to the point. He did not launch his message with a captivating story, a compelling quote, or a personal anecdote. Instead, Calvin immediately drew his listeners into the biblical text. The focus of the message was always Scripture, and he spoke what needed to be said with an economy of words. There were no wasted statements. Theodore Beza writes, "Every word weighed a pound."¹⁰

⁹ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 39.

¹⁰ Theodore Beza, quoted in Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin, Expository Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 31.

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For the most part, Calvin began each message by reviewing his previous sermon. He then established the context of his passage, introducing the congregation to the thinking of the biblical author and the original recipients. Calvin next showed how the particular text fit into the building argument of the entire book. After disclosing his stated proposition for the sermon, Calvin proceeded directly to his text, expounding it phrase by phrase. Parker writes, "Clause by clause, verse by verse, the congregation was led through the epistle or the prophecy or the narrative."¹¹

PREACHING IN A "LIVELY" FASHION

Fourth, *Calvin's preaching was extemporaneous in its delivery*. When Calvin stepped into his pulpit, he did not bring with him a written manuscript or any sermon notes. The Reformer made a conscious choice to preach *extempore*, that is, spontaneously. He wanted his sermons to have a natural and passionate delivery that was energetic and engaging, and he believed spontaneous preaching was best suited to achieve those ends.

The Reformer once said, "It appears to me that there is very little preaching of a lively kind in the Kingdom; but that the greater part deliver it by way of reading from a written discourse."¹² Therefore, relying on the Holy Spirit, he stood before the people with only an open Bible. He preached from a Hebrew Bible when expounding the Old Testament and from a Greek Bible when preaching the New Testament. For his exposition, he drew on his thorough study of the passage and relied on his rigorous preparation for his other ministry assignments, especially his classroom lecturing and commentary writing. The sermon came together as he preached.

Here is the genius of Calvin at work. Without any visual aids or even a sermon outline to guide his thoughts, with only an open Bible in the original language, his sermons nonetheless achieved a natural flow. He did not deliver stiff, academic treatments of the Scriptures. Rather, his sermons were warmhearted presentations of the truth. But his preaching was also fervent. The preacher must speak, he said, "in a way that shows he is not pretending."¹³ This Calvin did—he was blood-earnest in his preaching.

EXCAVATING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Fifth, *Calvin's preaching was exegetical in its approach*. Calvin insisted that the words of Scripture must be interpreted in their particular historical backgrounds, original

¹¹ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 90.

¹² John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin* (1855–1857; repr. Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 95.

¹³ Quoted in Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 115.

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languages, grammatical structures, and biblical contexts. Philip Schaff notes that Calvin affirmed “the sound and fundamental hermeneutical principle that the biblical authors, like all sensible writers, wished to convey to their readers one definite thought in words which they could understand.”¹⁴ Calvin believed that the discerning of the author’s meaning was the expositor’s first duty. He writes, “Since it is almost his [the interpreter’s] only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound, he misses his mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the meaning of his author.”¹⁵ Therefore, as Calvin preached, he moved “sentence by sentence, sometimes even word by word, explaining what each part means.”¹⁶

In this exegetical practice, Calvin insisted on the *sensus literalis*, the literal sense of the biblical text. “The true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning,”¹⁷ he writes, adding, “The important thing is that the Scripture should be understood and explained; how it is explained is secondary.”¹⁸ Calvin declares, “I have felt nothing to be of more importance than a literal interpretation of the biblical text.”¹⁹

Calvin held to the analogy of faith, the idea that the Bible speaks with one voice, never contradicting itself—*sacra Scriptura sui interpres*, or “Scripture interprets Scripture.” So in his interpretation, he appealed to the full breadth of Scripture for light and support. Thus, he carefully consulted and cited cross-references, yet without deviating from the central thrust of the text he was preaching.

SPEAKING TO THE COMMON MAN

Sixth, *Calvin’s preaching was accessible in its simplicity*. As a preacher, Calvin’s primary aim was not to communicate to other theologians, but to reach the common person in the pew. He wanted people to become familiar with the Bible and to “make it a personal matter, not just a collection of historical ideas.”²⁰ To that end, this brilliant man

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1910; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 8:532.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1.

¹⁶ Boice, foreword to Calvin, *Sermons on Psalm 119 by John Calvin*, ix.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 136.

¹⁸ Quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 50.

¹⁹ General introduction in *Calvin: Commentaries*, ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, Henry P. Van Dusen (London and Philadelphia: S.C.M. and Westminster, 1958), 359.

²⁰ Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 139.

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intentionally chose to employ simple words and understandable language. “Preachers must be like fathers,” he writes, “dividing bread into small pieces to feed their children.”²¹

As Parker explains, the Reformer’s vocabulary was “nearly always familiar and easy.”²² He adds, “The word that Calvin used to describe what he regarded as the most suitable style for the preacher is *familier*,”²³ meaning a familiar or personal form of speaking. Further describing Calvin’s simple style, Boice writes: “There is little rhetorical flourish. His words are straightforward, the sentences simple.”²⁴ As Calvin preached, he spoke “very deliberately,”²⁵ making it easy, as one observer notes, “to write down all that he says.”²⁶ The result was that Calvin’s towering intellect lay “concealed, behind [his] deceptively simple explanations of his author’s meaning.”²⁷

Occasionally, Calvin would explain the meaning of a word more carefully, but without ever giving the Hebrew or Greek original. Yet Calvin did not hesitate to use the language of the Bible. “Calvin’s terminology ... hardly moves outside the Bible,” Parker observes. “Common words are ‘justify,’ ‘elect,’ ‘redeem,’ ‘sin,’ ‘repentance,’ ‘grace,’ ‘prayer,’ ‘judgment’ —in fact, all the familiar language of the Old and New Testaments.”²⁸

PASTORING THE LORD’S FLOCK

Seventh, *Calvin’s preaching was pastoral in its tone*. The Genevan Reformer never lost sight of the fact that he was a pastor. Thus, he warmly applied Scripture with loving exhortation to shepherd his flock. He preached with the intent of prompting and encouraging his sheep to follow the Word.

Calvin often used first-person plural pronouns—“us,” “we,” and “our”—as he exhorted his congregation. For example, he said: “Let us learn, therefore, not to become drunk on our foolish hopes. Rather, let us hope in God and in God’s promises, and we will never

²¹ Quoted by Joel R. Beeke in “John Calvin, Teacher and Practitioner of Evangelism,” *Reformation and Revival*, 10:4 (Fall 2001), 69.

²² Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 141–142.

²³ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁴ Boice, foreword to Calvin, *Sermons on Psalm 119 by John Calvin*, x.

²⁵ Publisher’s introduction, “John Calvin and His Sermons on Ephesians,” in John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (1562; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), ix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

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be deceived.”²⁹ By doing so, he humbly included himself in the need to act upon biblical truth. In this way, he avoided preaching down to his listeners.

Nevertheless, Calvin did not hesitate to call his listeners to self-examination as he applied biblical truth. For example, he proclaimed: “We must all, therefore, examine our lives, not against one of God’s precepts but against the whole law. Can any of us truly say that we are blameless?”³⁰ Sharp admonishment also distinguished Calvin’s preaching. When he was aware that members of his flock were flirting with sin, he openly attacked it. Calvin warned his congregation, asserting: “This vice reigns today far more than it ever did in Micah’s time. Indeed, much more! True, many are content to have the gospel preached, provided it does not touch them, or make them uncomfortable.”³¹ Such loving reproof was an essential part of his pastoral duty.

FENDING OFF RAVENOUS WOLVES

Eighth, *Calvin’s preaching was polemic in its defense of the truth.* For Calvin, preaching necessitated an apologetic defense of the faith. He believed that preachers must guard the truth, so systematic exposition required confronting the Devil’s lies in all their deceptive forms. He writes, “To assert the truth is only one half of the office of teaching ... except all the fallacies of the devil be also dissipated.”³²

From his pulpit, Calvin, as a staunch guardian of the truth, took every opportunity to uphold sound doctrine and to refute all who contradicted it. He openly rebuked the false teachers of his day, especially the pope. For instance, he said: “The Roman Catholic Church today continues the same kind of idolatrous practices that were common amongst the heathen, but in the name of the apostles and of the virgin Mary. The only things that have changed are the names of the idols! But superstition is as wicked and detestable today as it was amongst the first idolaters!”³³

When preaching, the Reformer writes, “The pastor ought to have two voices: one, for gathering the sheep; and another, for warding off ... wolves.”³⁴ To be sure, Calvin used a

²⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003), 84.

³⁰ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Galatians*, 264.

³¹ Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, 101.

³² Quoted in J. Graham Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom: An Anthology Arranged Alphabetically by a Grateful Reader* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 252.

³³ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Galatians*, 3.

³⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 296.

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stern voice to fend off the ravenous wolves. In defending the gospel, Calvin minced no words.

CALLING OUT TO LOST SINNERS

Ninth, *Calvin's preaching was passionate in its outreach.* There is a sad misconception today that because Calvin believed in predestination, he was not evangelistic. The persistent myth is that he did not have a passion to reach lost souls for Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth. Calvin possessed a great passion to reach lost souls. For that reason, he preached the gospel with heart-stirring persuasion, passionately pleading with errant sinners to cast themselves on God's mercy.

As he concluded his sermons, Calvin often gave a pressing appeal to the lost. Hear Calvin's own words as he preached Galatians 2:15–16:

We cannot rest until the Lord Jesus Christ has saved us. See, therefore, how good it is for us to be heavy laden, that is to say, to hate our sins and to be in such anguish over them that we feel surrounded by the pains of death, so that we seek God in order that He might ease us of our burdens. We must, however, seek Him in the knowledge that we cannot obtain salvation, full or in part, unless it is granted to us as a gift.³⁵

He then urged his listeners to be “saved through faith ... [for we must] give ourselves to Him wholly and completely.”³⁶ Clearly Calvin was a true evangelist.

MAGNIFYING THE GLORY OF GOD

Tenth, *Calvin's preaching was doxological in its conclusion.* All of Calvin's sermons were God-centered throughout, but his closing appeals were especially heartfelt and passionate. He simply could not step down from his pulpit without lifting up the Lord and urging his listeners to yield to His absolute supremacy. They must humble themselves under the mighty hand of God.

As he concluded, Calvin regularly exhorted his congregation: “Let us fall before the majesty of our great God.” Whatever his text, these fervent words called for the unconditional submission of his listeners.

Calvin always concluded with a God-exalting prayer. His intent was to elevate his congregation to the throne of God. These concluding intercessions were vertical in their

³⁵ Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Galatians*, 186.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

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thrust, pointing his listeners upward to God. They unveiled the glorious majesty of the heavenly Father as he left his people *coram Deo*—before the face of God.

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS LATER

As we mark the five hundredth year since Calvin's birth, we must conclude that he remains "one of the most influential preachers in the history of Christian thought."³⁷ Arguably the greatest theologian and commentator the church has ever known, he nevertheless was primarily a preacher. This magisterial Reformer gave himself to the exposition of the Word as perhaps no one else in history.

May God raise up a new generation of expositors like Calvin. May we experience a new Reformation in our day. And may we see, once more, the illuminating power of the Word preached in this midnight hour of history.³⁸

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³⁷ Donald K. McKim, *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 121.

³⁸ Lawson, S. J. (2008). "Chapter 6: The Preacher of God's Word." In B. Parsons (Ed.), *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology* (pp. 71–80). Reformation Trust Publishing.