

# The Oracles Of God: The Expository Preaching of John Calvin

**Dr. Mark Minnick**

Senior Pastor, Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Greenville, SC  
Professor, Bob Jones Memorial Seminary

Most pastors know of John Calvin (1509-1564) only as a writer of reformed theology. But in his day Calvin was influential primarily through his preaching. For nearly a quarter century he mounted the pulpit stairs of St. Pierre's Cathedral in Geneva, Switzerland twice every Lord's Day to preach systematically through Bible books. Beginning in 1549 these sermons were recorded in shorthand by a professional stenographer, then printed and distributed to missionaries and colporteurs throughout Europe. Many were read in the services of churches with no pastors. Over one thousand of them remain extant. Their study reveals that Calvin was the finest model of expository preaching since the Apostles, giving *the ablest, soundest, clearest expositions of Scripture that had been seen in one thousand years* (Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin, Expository Preacher*, 29). This presentation explores the convictions and methods that enabled him to do so.

## **I. John Calvin's Estimation of Scripture:**

- *Before I go any further, it is worth-while to say something about the authority of Scripture, not only to prepare our hearts to reverence it, but to banish all doubt. . . Now daily oracles are not sent from heaven, for it pleased the Lord to hallow his truth to everlasting remembrance in the Scriptures alone [cf. John 5:39]. Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard (Institutes of the Christian Religion, I, chapter vii, paragraph 1).*
- *He writes on Jeremiah 18:21, The Prophet seems here to have been driven through indignation to utter imprecations which are not consistent with a right feeling; for even if Christ had not said with his own mouth, that we are to pray for those who curse us, the very law of God, ever known to the holy fathers, was sufficient. Jeremiah then ought not to have uttered these curses, and to have imprecated final destruction on his enemies, though they fully deserved it. But it must be observed, that he was moved not otherwise than by the Holy Spirit, to become thus indignant against his enemies; for he could not have been excused on the ground that indignation often transgresses the bounds of patience, for the children of God ought to bear all injuries to the utmost; but, as I have said, the Prophet here has announced nothing rashly, nor did he allow himself to wish anything as of himself, but obediently proclaimed what the Holy Spirit dictated, as his faithful instrument.*

- He writes on Jeremiah 23:21, *For God in the first place chose his prophets, and committed to them the office of teaching, and then he commanded them what to say, and dictated to them as it were his message, that they might not bring forward anything devised by themselves, but be only his heralds, as it has appeared elsewhere.*
- *Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word (Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV, chapter viii, paragraph 8).*
- *Not even the apostles were free to go beyond the Word: much less their successors. Accordingly, Peter, who was well instructed by the Master as to how much he should do, reserves nothing else for himself or others except to impart the doctrine as it has been handed down by God. “Let him who speaks,” he says, “speak only the words of God” [I Peter 4:11]. . . We therefore teach that faithful ministers are now not permitted to coin any new doctrine, but that they are simply to cleave to that doctrine to which God has subjected all men without exception (Ibid., paragraph 9).*

## **II. John Calvin’s Hermeneutic:**

### A. His view of Origen’s allegorical approach:

- Regarding the statement, *not of the letter but of the spirit* (II Corinthians 3:6), which Origen took as the key text directing preachers not to confine themselves to literal interpretation, he writes, *The exposition contrived by Origen has got into general circulation—that by the “letter” we ought to understand the grammatical and genuine meaning of Scripture, or the “literal” sense, (as they call it,) and that by the “spirit” is meant the allegorical meaning, which is commonly reckoned to be the “spiritual” meaning. Accordingly, during several centuries, nothing was more commonly said, or more generally received, than this—that Paul here furnishes us with a key for expounding Scripture by allegories, while nothing is farther from his intention.*

*From this arose a very pernicious error—that of imagining that the perusal of the Scripture would be not merely useless, but even injurious, unless it were drawn out into allegories. This error was the source of many evils. For there was not merely a liberty allowed of adulterating the genuine meaning of Scripture, but the more of audacity any one had in this manner of acting, so much the more eminent an interpreter of Scripture he was accounted. Thus many of the ancients recklessly played with the sacred Word of God, as if it had been a ball tossed to and fro. In consequence of this, too, heretics had it more in their power to trouble the Church; for as it had become a general practice to make any passage whatever mean anything that one might choose, there was no frenzy so absurd or monstrous, as not to admit of*

*being brought forward under some pretext of allegory. Even good men themselves were carried headlong, so as to contrive very many mistaken opinions, led astray through a fondness for allegory (Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 3. 6).*

B. His view of Chrysostom's literal approach:

- *The outstanding merit of our author, Chrysostom, is that it was his supreme concern always not to turn aside even to the slightest degree from the genuine, simple sense of Scripture and to allow himself no liberties by twisting the plain meaning of the words (in his introduction to a French translation of Chrysostom's homilies as quoted by Jack Rogers and Donald McKim in *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*, 114).*

C. His convictions:

- Calvin states in his "Epistle Dedicatory" to his commentary on Romans, his personal conviction regarding the expounder of Scripture. *Since it is, he says, almost his only work to lay open the mind of the writer whom he undertakes to explain, the degree in which he leads away his readers from it, in that degree he goes astray from his purpose.*

*It is therefore an audacity, closely allied to sacrilege, rashly to turn Scripture in any way we please, and to indulge our fancies as in sport; which has been done by many in former times.*

- T. H. L. Parker, the world's leading authority on Calvin's commentaries and preaching, has observed, *One of Calvin's stock phrases in criticizing a translation or an interpretation is that it does not express "the mind" of the particular author concerned: "Erasmus prefers the word 'congregation,' but this "is foreign to Paul's mind." Again, "The Word 'dispensator' which Erasmus has kept from the Vulgate, does not at all express Paul's mind." "In Greek Paul says  $\mu\lambda\ \chi\varsigma\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\ \rho\epsilon\iota\sigma\mu\alpha\ \epsilon\pi\iota\ \chi\varsigma\tau\iota\mu\omega\varsigma$ , which Erasmus translates 'erga Christum;' but the Vulgate, in my opinion, comes closer to Paul's mind." And more decisively, "This exposition. . . is too remote from Paul's mind, a consideration on which we should rely more than on any other" (*Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 93).*
- *Let us know that the true meaning of Scripture is the genuine and simple one, and let us embrace and hold it tightly. Let us. . . boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those fictitious expositions which lead us away from the literal sense (quoted from *Corpus Reformatorum* 50.237, by Richard C. Gamble, "Exposition and Method in Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987), 163).*

No wonder then, that in his preface to *Calvin's Commentary on Zechariah*, J. O. Thrusington, the translator, writes, *There have been many Commentators before and after the time of CALVIN, but it may be doubted whether any of them possessed his combined excellencies, especially the capacity of being so plain as to be understood by common readers, and of being at the same time so profound as to be interesting and instructive to the most learned; so that his Comments do in this respect retain, in a measure, the character of the book he interprets and explains. Of his superiority over his predecessors we have the striking testimony of the learned Arminius, who, as he differed from him on several points of no small importance, may justly be considered to have been an impartial witness. His words are remarkable, — "Next to the reading of Scripture, which I strongly recommend, I advise you to read the Commentaries of Calvin. . . for I consider that he is incomparable in interpreting Scripture, and that his Commentaries are of more value than all that the library of the Fathers transmits to us; so that I concede to him even a spirit of prophecy superior to that of most, yea, of all others"* (bold mine).

### III. John Calvin's Preaching:

Just twenty-seven years old, but already forced to flee his native France due to teaching Lutheran doctrine in Paris, Calvin was passing through Geneva, Switzerland in 1536, intending to stay only a night. But when William Farel, the fiery leader of the Genevan Reformation, heard Calvin was lodged in the city, he hurried immediately to the inn and to plead with the young theologian to remain and help him. Calvin demurred, pleading his desire to settle quietly in Strasbourg for the pursuit of his studies. Farel rose up and denounced Calvin for seeking his own interest rather than that of Christ. He warned him of the Lord's punishment. So Calvin acquiesced. He was elected by the protestant church there to be "Reader in theology," and then, perhaps a year later, its "Pastor."

There are no published sermons from this period, but we know that he lectured on the Pauline Epistles in St. Pierre's Cathedral. Calvin and Farel presented to the City Council a three part program for reorganizing the Church. (1) City to be divided into districts in which supervisors were appointed to watch over the morals of the people. Notable offenders were to be reported to the minister (Calvin) who had the power of reproof, and as a last resort, excommunication. (2) All citizens to assent to a Confession of Faith. (3) A scheme of religious education was proposed. The Council adopted the program, but it proved impossible to implement due to the opposition of the populace. In February, 1538, a new Council came to power which had the votes to overthrow the reformers. The populace, seeing the opportunity for change, constantly threatened the reformer.

*I have lived in marvelous combats here, he wrote. I have been saluted in mockery of an evening by fifty or sixty gun-shots before my door.*

In April Calvin and Farel were given three days to leave the city. Easter Sunday was Calvin's last at St. Pierre's.

From 1538-1541 Calvin lived in Strasbourg and undertook to pastor its church of French refugees. He also lectured on theology several times a week. Meanwhile, Geneva was going from bad to worse without firm leadership. By 1540 an influential party was making overtures for his return. Calvin shuddered at the thought of returning to turmoil. But on September 13, 1541, he did. *His return was a most momentous event in Reformation history, for the pale, thin figure, with the piercing eyes, though in form body, that once more appeared in the pulpit of St. Peter's was not merely to dominate the little Republic on the shores of Lake Lemman for the next quarter of a century, but to make it the capital of a spiritual dominion, whose borders extended to the Northern seas and ultimately beyond the Atlantic* (James Mackinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation*, 75).

At his return to St. Pierre's on Sunday, September 16, he climbed up into the pulpit, entirely omitted any reference whatsoever to the hiatus (since Easter day 1538), and took up his preaching at the very verse (we don't know the book) where he had left off three years earlier.

Under Calvin, Geneva became the foremost Reformation city. Persecuted protestants from all over Europe found refuge there. During the reign of "Bloody" Mary (1553-1558) the Geneva Bible was published for the use hard pressed English believers. John Knox, the Scottish reformer was one of those who fled to Geneva in the 1550's, calling it "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the Apostles" and "the most godly reformed church and city of the world."

"The Venerable Company of Pastors" was established as a missionary agency. Not only did these men infiltrate Roman Catholic Europe in all of its major countries—Italy, Germany, Spain, Scotland, England, and France—but they also carried the Gospel to the Indians of South America.

Beginning in 1549 we have a record of Calvin's preaching. Sunday morning, and again in the afternoon, he occupied the pulpit. In addition, every other week, he preached once a day. It was not until this period of his life that a secretary began to take down his preaching, making the sermons available for publication. Once printed, they were carried by missionaries and colporteurs into many other countries. Often they were read for the Sunday services of churches in which there was no pastor.

Calvin preached his last sermon on February 6, 1564. He died in the evening of May 27.

(Adapted from T. H. L. Parker's, *The Oracles of God*, pp. 22-44)

A. His view of the preacher's obligation to prepare:

- *God has promised that His blessing shall be upon the hands of those who work. . . If I should enter the pulpit without deigning to glance at a book, and frivolously imagine to myself, "Oh well, when I preach, God will give me enough to say," and come here without troubling to read, or thinking what I bought to declare, and do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people—then I should be an arrogant upstart* (quoted from *Corpus Reformatorum*, xxvi, 473-474, by T. H. L. Parker in *The Oracles of God*, p. 69).

B. His approach:

- Expounding whole books of the Bible, passage by passage.

- In 1549. . .

Sunday morning	Hebrews
Sunday evening	Psalms
Weekday mornings	Jeremiah

- In 1555

Sunday morning	Pastoral Epistles
Sunday afternoon	Pastoral Epistles
Weekday mornings	Deuteronomy

- In 1561

Sunday morning	Harmony of the Gospels
Weekday mornings	Judges and I Samuel

- A first sermon presenting the general theme of the book.
- Subsequent sermons expounding the book verse by verse.
  - Often he would explain the meaning of the text.
  - Sometimes he would explain word meanings.
  - Every part of the text would be addressed to the congregation.
  - Application arose naturally from the careful exposition.  
(See portion from one of Calvin's sermons at conclusion of this lecture)

C. His view of the authority of preaching:

- *It is now added in the second verse, “The beginning of speaking, such as the Lord made by Hosea.” They who give this rendering, “with Hosea,” seem to explain the Prophet’s meaning frigidly. The letter  $\delta$ , beth, I know, has this sense often in Scripture; but the Prophet, no doubt, in this place represents himself as the instrument of the Holy Spirit. God then spake in Hosea, or by Hosea, for he brought forth nothing from his own brain, but God spake by him; this is a form of speaking with which we shall often meet. On this, indeed, depends the whole authority of God’s servants that they give not themselves loose reins, but faithfully deliver, as it were, from hand to hand, what the Lord has commanded them, without adding any thing whatever of their own (Commentary on Hosea, Chapter I. 2).*
- *St. Paul does not want a man to make a parade of himself, so that everyone applauds him and says: “Oh, what fine speaking! Oh, his great knowledge! Oh, what a subtle mind!”. . . When a man enters the pulpit, is it that he may be seen from afar, that he may be preeminent? No, not at all! He preaches so that God may speak to us by the mouth of a man” (quoted from a sermon on I Timothy in T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 54).*
- *From among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them (Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV. chapter 1, paragraph 5).*

## A PORTION FROM ONE OF CALVIN'S SERMONS

Remember that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, which is the seed of David according to my gospel. Wherein I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even unto bonds, but the word of God is not bound. For this cause I suffer all things for the elects' sake, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Jesus Christ, with everlasting glory (II Timothy 2:8-10)

Saint Paul, having spoken of afflictions which he suffered for the Gospel, comforteth himself and rejoices that the word of God is not bound with him, and is glad that Jesus Christ is in the mean season glorified, that the Gospel hath its course, and that the Church increaseth, that many be brought to the obedience of faith. And thus we see that he had no regard to his own person to seek his own private commodity, but gave himself especially and wholly to this that Jesus Christ might be served and honoured throughout all the world, that God might be known for a father and saviour, that silly souls which were in the highway to perish everlastingly might be drawn from thence to the way of salvation.

True it is that St. Paul desired it. And therefore all they that have charge to preach the word of God are put in mind here of the affection which they ought to bear to the whole Church: that is to say, they must forget themselves when the common salvation of all the faithful cometh in question. And besides that, we have also a general lesson that if any servant of God be afflicted we must not be cast down for all that, as though the word of God ruled and reigned no more: but rather remember that it is taught us here that it is at liberty though the man be prisoner. For God can well suffer someone of his servants to be persecuted, but yet notwithstanding he will open the door to his gospel, in spite of all his enemies.

True it is that Satan's mind, and his imps that serve him, is to stay the word of God from having course anymore and to have it hindered on all sides, yea and trodden under foot: but God will cause his truth to remain invincible. It shall prosper and grow on. When men seek so to oppress it, it shall increase and enlarge despite men's teeth. As indeed St. Paul's imprisonment caused the word of God to be published with far greater authority. For as he saith in the first to the Philippians, his imprisonment became honorable and famous not only in the emperor's court but everywhere when the name of Jesus Christ, which was not heard of before, was proclaimed among the unbelievers. Yea, when the wicked brought what false reports they could to slander Paul and to bring all his doctrine into discredit, this caused a great number to open their ears and to inquire of that which before they heard not of and was hid from them. Thus God multiplied the Church by St. Paul's preaching. Yea, and when his person was imprisoned, the doctrine had far greater liberty. This is it we have to mark in this place.

And thus we see that St. Paul doth not only show by his example to all them that have charge to preach the Gospel that they must above all things procure the building of the Church without any great care had to themselves, but giveth us to understand that we must not be dismayed when we see any afflictions upon the servants of God. And why so? Let us hope notwithstanding that the Gospel shall go on still further and further and that God will overcome all lets and hinderances which seem so hard unto us and astonish us.

But we are so far from applying this as it ought to be, that a great number forge ???? of their own brains to put away the word of God from them and though there be no cause, yet they imagine either this or that to turn them aside (as they think) that the Gospel may not increase. Seeing this unthankfulness to be seen, know we that we are far from this virtue and constancy which St. Paul showeth here and whereunto he exhorteth the faithful.

And so let us suffer the Gospel to run on, that is to say, let us suffer it to have its course. And though the wicked strive to lessen the honour and authority it ought to have, know we notwithstanding that do what they can, our Lord will maintain his truth always. Yea, and will cause the sufferings of the ministers of his word to serve for a witness and seal that his Gospel may be daily so much more esteemed, as indeed there is good reason.

When we see a man neither of power nor credit, which notwithstanding resisteth them that hath power and sustaineth all assaults without bowing or bending, when we see, I say, the servants of God stand stoutly and do what men can, are nothing dismayed, would we desire a better proof or more sure to ratify that which God hath already put forth to us touching his truth? And therefore let us learn that when the wicked have conspired what they can, that notwithstanding they cannot pluck up the word of God, but it will grow on and God will increase the number and company of his, and will make his seed fruitful throughout all the world.

Now St. Paul joineth to this matter, *that he suffereth these things because of the elect*. As if he said, that he had not so great care of his own person, but thought rather upon the children of God, and that *to the end*, saith he, *that they might obtain the salvation which is in Jesus Christ*, as well as I, and therewithal obtain everlasting glory.

St. Paul setteth here the salvation against the afflictions which he suffereth; the glory to so many slanderous and evil reports that were cast against him. As if he said, I have a good recompense, **I am content to suffer affliction and to see death before my face: for the salvation of the children of God is in the meanwhile advanced by this means, and this is enough and enough again for me. And again, though the world do set light by me, though the unbelievers cast me out of their company, God maketh this advantageous to the glory of all the faithful. This is in few words St. Paul's meaning.**

But here a man might ask, whether the glory of God were not his chiefest mark he shot at, which is a great deal more to be preferred before the salvation of men. But this point is easy to be answered: to wit, that Saint Paul goeth about to exhort the children of God and to encourage them. For this cause he maketh mention of them only, and of their profit: as if he said, "My friends, it is true that according to the flesh you may be shaken when you hear the wicked reports that are spread abroad of me, as this 'See we not that God hath forsaken this wicked ???? See how he rotteth in the prison, and if his cause were god, would God leave him in his need?'

Therefore when you hear these fleeing lies, well may you be astonished according to the flesh: but know you, that I suffer for your profit, that you may be the better strengthened and that my imprisonment may serve you for a good witness, that as I have feely and boldly preached to you the word of God, so also I spare not my life for you, as for whatsoever belongeth to mine own person, I shut mine eyes against it, it grieveth me not to be in prison, it is all one to me so that

you profit by it. And Therefore be not unthankful to God, seeing he will confirm you the doctrine which you received before: for you know it was not preached to you in vain nor lightly: but when you see that I stand to it, even unto death, know you that I have served God faithfully, and let your faith be so much the more assured thereby.”

So that we see now, wherefore Paul speaketh here rather of the children of God, then of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. For his mind was to exhort the faithful that they might know it was for their profit and for their salvation that he suffered.

But yet a man might here reply again, that it seemeth needless for St. Paul to suffer for the chosen. For cannot God save them whom he hath chosen and taken to be his children before the world was made? Must men help him? Hath the unchangeable counsel of God need of man’s help or help of creatures? Why then doth Saint Paul say that he suffereth for the chosen’s sake?

Well, true it is that God can bring his to this inheritance which is prepared for them easily enough, but yet it pleaseth him to make men’s labour of some account: not that he hath need to borrow ought of us, but he doth us this honour of his free goodness and will have us to be instruments of his virtue. And therefore St. Paul doth not brag here that the salvation of the children of God hangeth upon his constancy or upon his afflictions which he had to suffer, but he meaneth only that God will guide his by the means of his word, and useth the men whom he hath chosen to this as to his work, and maketh them instruments of the virtue of his Holy Ghost.

And therefore let us mark, that as God began our salvation himself alone, so also he bringeth it to an end, but yet he ceaseth not to use the means which he appointed as he thinketh good. Not of necessity, but because it pleases him so. And hereby let us consider and know his goodness so much the more. When he useth us to so honorable a service, that he giveth us charge to procure the salvation of his children and to have care of it.

True it is that this is precisely spoken of the ministers of the Gospel, but yet notwithstanding it reacheth to all the faithful both to great and small. **And therefore there is none of us, but is bound as much as lieth in him to advance the salvation of his neighbors.** Not that we are able to do anything in it of our selves (as it hath been said), but it is God that setteth us in such honour and dignity, to make us which are but castaways and condemned by nature, to be ministers of their salvation who might otherwise perish.

This ought to encourage us so much the more, when we see if we suffer for the Gospel, it is not only an acceptable service to God, he is not only honoured herein by us, but also that it is profitable service to the whole church, to confirm the salvation of the faithful. When we see this, have we not occasion to be stirred up so much the more to do our duty, when we are called to it through the goodness of God? And St. Paul saith flatly, *To the end that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Jesus Christ.*

**When he saith, *They also*, he showeth that we must not be given every man to himself, but we must draw as much company with us as we can. And therefore if God have done this honour to any man, to make him go before, he must not neglect those whom he might win, but he must gather as much company as he can.** For we shall not need to fear that our blessing

shall be diminished. As if we have an inheritance in this world, when it is divided into many parties, every one hath but a little: but as for the heavenly inheritance we are very well assured that we lose nothing or lessen our part any whit at all when we draw many of our neighbors, yea an infinite multitude. That is our glory and joy. When God calleth us to him, he goeth not to work by portions, as things either increase or decrease in this world: but we shall have so much, that (as I said before) our salvation shall be so much the more increased, and glory likewise, when we have gathered a multitude to our God.

--*Sermons of M. John Calvin on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 1579. The Sermons of Joh Calvine upon the Seconde Epistle of S. Paule to Timothie, "The 11. Sermon, upon the 2. Chapter,"* pp. 780-784 (bold mine).

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RESOURCES:**

- John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Baker Book House).  
John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Timothy and Titus* (Banner of Truth, 1983).  
John Calvin, *Sermons from Job* (selected and translated by Leroy Nixon. Eerdmans, 1952).  
John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Banner of Truth).  
John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (Banner of Truth, 1987).  
John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Banner of Truth).  
John Calvin, *Sermons on Hebrews* (Banner of Truth).  
John Calvin, *Sermons on Job* (Banner of Truth).  
John Calvin, *Sermons on the Beatitudes* (Banner of Truth).  
John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Banner of Truth).  
  
T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).  
Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin: Expository Preacher* (Eerdmans, 1950).  
T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (Lutterworth Press, 1947).