Calvin's missionary thought and practice

It is all too often said that John Calvin had no interest in mission. Such statements are normally made out of an unintentional ignorance, a popular myth being repeated. In some cases, however, it is because the standard of judgment is not entirely fair, it being based on modern missionary activity or organisation. D. H-W. Gensichen has asked valid questions:

‘Could it be that the modern form and structure of missionary activity was not the only possible norm for missions? Should not modern missionary conceptions and practices be examined in the light of the Reformation, rather than the attitude of the Reformers in the light of what had come to be considered as the only legitimate standard for missions?’

These are valid questions and while we shall not attempt to answer them directly, they should nonetheless be kept in mind.

In Calvin's thought the church assumes an importance which is often not to be found in today’s understanding of mission. He writes of the church:

‘There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep(s) us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Matthew 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation...

There are for Calvin two marks of the church, the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's Institution. These signs of the true church are not only evidence of its existence, but duties and aims of the church. They are in effect the primary mission of the church. In Calvin's understanding the church cannot exist without being involved in local mission.

Within a settled church, pastors and teachers are essential 'to keep doctrine whole and pure', while apostles and prophets have no place, for as Calvin explains: 'The nature of the apostles' function is clear from this command:

"Go preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). No set limits are allotted to them, but the whole earth is assigned to them to bring into obedience to Christ, in order that by spreading the gospel wherever they can among the nations, they may raise up his kingdom everywhere.

Calvin goes on with his definition in this way: "Evangelists" I take to be those who, although lower in rank than apostles, were next to them in office and functioned in their place. Calvin believed there were evangelists in his own day, as the following words show: 'I do not deny that the Lord has sometimes at a later period raised up apostles, or at least evangelists in their place, as has happened in our own day. (Our emphasis) The church, then (with its various offices), had a vital place in the Reformer's missionary thought.

Calvin also stressed the responsibility which the individual member of the church had for mission. He did this by emphasising the Christian's concern for his neighbour. This neighbour included the heathen man or woman: 'Christ has shown in the parable of the Samaritan that the term "neighbour" includes even the most remote person' (Luke 10:36). 'We ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love.' The Christian has a responsibility to pray
for 'all men who dwell on earth'\textsuperscript{10} When we think and pray only about our own needs and do not remember those of our neighbours, we cut ourselves loose from the body of Christ Jesus our Lord, and how can we then be joined to God?\textsuperscript{11} In a sermon on 1 Timothy he says: 'We must not only pray for believers which are our brethren already, but for them that are very far off, as the poor unbelievers: although there seem to be a great distance and thick wall between both, yet must we notwithstanding have pity of their destruction, to the end that we may pray to God, that he should draw them unto him. Seeing it is so, let us mark, how awful a thing it is for every man to be taken up with his own interests and have no care and regard to his neighbours.\textsuperscript{42} Calvin made it plain, then, that mission was to be the concern not only of the church as a whole, but also of each individual member.

The primary motive for mission in Calvin's thought was the glory of God. In his exposition of the Lord's Prayer he writes: 'We should wish God to have the honour he deserves.'\textsuperscript{13}

>'If holiness is associated with God's name where separated from all other names, it breathes pure glory; here we are bidden to request not only that God vindicate his sacred name of all contempt and dishonour, but also that he subdue the whole race of mankind to reverence for it.'\textsuperscript{14} He concludes the first three petitions of the prayer with these words: 'In making these requests we are to keep God's glory alone before our eyes.'\textsuperscript{45}

A further motive for mission was that of compassion for one's neighbour. These motives are found side by side in the following quotation from a sermon on Deuteronomy 33:18-19:

>'We must as much as in us lieth, endeavour to draw all men on the earth to God, that all men may fear him and worship him with one accord. And indeed if we have any kindness in us, if we see that men go to destruction till God has them under his obedience, ought we not be moved with pity to draw the poor souls out of hell, and to bring them into the way of salvation? Again on the other side, if we know that God is our Father, should we be not desirous to have him known to be such of all men? And if we cannot find in our hearts that all creatures should do him homage, is it not a sign that we have no great regard for his honour?'

Any account of Calvin's practice in mission would be incomplete if reference to the practical problems of his time were omitted. But space does not allow. Let it suffice to say, that despite great practical problems Calvin still evidenced an obvious zeal for mission. Before 1555 only a few men had been sent from Geneva to other countries 'usually by Calvin himself'.\textsuperscript{16} In April 1555, the first formal mission was sent to Piedmont.

Then later in the year a mission was dispatched to France. 'In 1556 three more missionaries went out, one to Bourges and two to French colonies that were to be organised on an island off Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Calvin, who was attending the Frankfort fair in Germany when the 1556 missions were sent, was told of them in a letter from Nicolas des Gallars, the pastor functioning as a substitute Moderator while Calvin was absent.\textsuperscript{47} The latter attempt to found a settlement in Brazil and make the colony a base for mission work among the Topinombou Indians came to a sad end when three of the Calvinists were martyred in 1558.\textsuperscript{18} By 1557 the sending of emissaries to France had become a regular part of the Geneva Company's business. In that year eleven churches received pastors; in 1558, twenty-two; in 1559, thirty-two; and in 1560, 1561 and 1562, twelve churches a year. (These figures, taken from the official Registers of the Company, do not reveal that 1561 was actually the peak year, when, as we learn from records supplementing the Registers, more than one hundred men were sent out.)\textsuperscript{49} This record does not take into account the direct influence of Calvin's sermons and correspondence upon men who read them. It cannot be doubted that many of these, because of his influence, were keen for mission, certainly the later Calvinists were.\textsuperscript{20}

In giving the above account of Calvin's missionary thought and practice, we would not like to overstate man's activity. The Reformer, however, saw no contradiction in the view 'that the kingdom of Christ is neither to be advanced nor maintained by the industry of men, but this is the work of God alone; for believers are taught to rest solely on his blessing'.\textsuperscript{21}
The above is not just a positive statement of Calvin's missionary thought and practice. It is also a challenge to let our present understanding of mission be enriched by the contribution of a theologian of the past so that the entire world 'should be the theatre of his glory by the spread of his gospel'.

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7 ibid., IV:III:4.
8 ibid., II:VIII:55.
9 ibid., ILVIII:55.
10 ibid., III:XX:38.
12 Sermon on 1 Timothy 2:1, 2.
14 ibid., III:XX:41.
15 ibid., III:XX:43.
17 ibid., p. 2.
19 Kingdom (p. 2).
22 Quoted in Zwemer, *op. cit.*