

John Calvin as Pastor

Shawn D. Wright

INTRODUCTION

EVERYONE SEEMS TO have a strong opinion about John Calvin. Charles Spurgeon did. He said, “The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin’s system is the nearest to perfection.” Another preacher had a more negative view. Jimmy Swaggart noted that “Calvin has, I believe, caused untold millions of souls to be damned.”

SHAWN D. WRIGHT is Associate Professor of Church History at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

He has been active in church planting and pastoring and currently serves as an elder at Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to contributing in journals, Dr. Wright has authored *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza* (Wipf and Stock, 2007) and co-edited *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Broadman & Holman, 2007) with Thomas R. Schreiner.

Even supposedly “neutral” and scholarly sources like the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* cannot help claiming that “Calvin was the ‘cruel’ and ‘the unopposed dictator of Geneva.’” So much for scholarly objectivity! Even Calvin’s contemporaries had varied evaluations of him. One of his best friends and his chosen successor, Theodore Beza, eulogized him in this way: “I have been a witness of him for sixteen years, and I think that I am fully entitled to say that in this man there was exhibited to all an example of the life and

death of the Christian, such as it will not be easy to depreciate, and it will be difficult to imitate.”¹ Jerome Bolsec was another early biographer of

Calvin. He, though, had been run out of Geneva by Calvin and the city authorities for his attack on predestination and later reverted to Catholicism. Here’s his evaluation of the Genevan:

It seems that in our day this enemy of God and Christian unity [that is, Satan] has gathered most of the described heresies and false doctrines already long refuted and condemned and stowed them away in the city of Geneva through Jean Calvin of Noyon, a man, among others of the world, ambitious, presumptuous, arrogant, cruel, malicious, vindictive and, above all, ignorant.²

If nothing else, this shows us that the study of Calvin is a very interesting subject indeed.

In this article, I am not going to prove definitively that Calvin was good, or bad for that matter. I have much more modest aims. I hope to show that John Calvin, the great Reformed theologian, was a pastor. This is often overlooked as we think of Calvin the systematic theologian or the biblical scholar. He was these things, but his fundamental occupation was as a shepherd of the flock of God. Those who were associated with Calvin (like Beza, Guillaume Farel, and Martin Bucer), those who wrote Calvin seeking his ministerial advice, and

those who heard him regularly preach in one of the three churches in Geneva knew that he was at heart a pastor. Ministry consumed Calvin's life. After his "sudden conversion" to the Lord, as he called it, Calvin's life—except for an aborted attempt to be a reclusive scholar—was consumed with the labors of a pastor.³

We can see this in numerous ways. First of all, we can read the agendas that Calvin wrote directing the Genevan church to change in a more biblical direction. His *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* as well as his *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church* fall into this category. Second, we could peruse his *Catechism*, written to clarify basic Christian doctrines and instruct the populace of Geneva in the new-found truth of Protestantism. This was important enough to Calvin that he revised it and released it in a second edition. Third, we could look at Calvin's massive epistolary output, quite a bit of which is pastoral in nature. He was often asked to pastor persons from a distance, through letters, and he did so willingly and thoroughly. Fourth, we could pay attention to the many liturgical innovations that Calvin wrought first in Strasbourg and then throughout his ministry for about twenty-three years, from 1541 to 1564, in Geneva. Not only did Calvin the pastor work tirelessly to produce an order of service for the young church and write out special orders for the sacrament of the eucharist and the celebration of marriages, but he also pioneered efforts in the Reformed churches to prioritize the singing of the Psalms in corporate worship. Fifth, we might pay attention to Calvin's sermons, regularly filled with sensitive, or forceful, applications to the weary Genevan congregation. Sixth, we could notice several of Calvin's occasional treatises that are at heart pastoral in nature. For example, his *Reply to Sadoleto* may be the best short introduction to the pastoral flavor of Calvin's thought. In all of these ways we see that Calvin was a pastor.⁴

And we also see Calvin's pastoral emphasis in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for which Calvin is most famous. When

we remember that *institutio* meant "instruction" for Calvin and remember that Calvin's first audience in this book was not seminary students but rather Protestant pastors and laypeople—as is shown by Calvin's own translations of the *Institutes* out of Latin into French so that the beleaguered French Protestants could read it—we get a firm clue that this greatest of all Protestant reformational treatises is intensely pastoral. For the sake of time, we will limit our attention to Calvin's pastoral theology seen in his *Institutes*.

CALVIN'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY IN THE INSTITUTES

Indeed, it may be its pastoral orientation that makes the *Institutes* so relevant for twenty-first century readers.⁵ I think that it is this pastoral focus, which gives the *Institutes* its "feet," so to speak, and allows modern readers to connect so familiarly with Calvin, even though he inhabited a different world—several religious, political, social, and intellectual revolutions ago. In fact, I believe that Calvin's "pastoral vision," that is, his view of the priority of God and a relationship that all human beings must have with him in either friendship or judgment, permeates the *Institutes* and makes it intensely relevant for us. For Pastor Calvin would remind us that although we may not be newly-Protestantized, French refugees concerned with maintaining our liberties from Savoy and France and often frustrated by the heavy-handed policies of big-brother Bern, we are the same sort of persons as they were, having to do with the same God, and on a similar pilgrimage to the same destinies.⁶

At the very beginning of the *Institutes*, we are confronted with Calvin's pastoral emphasis. Here he lays out the rubric he will employ for the next 1,487 pages, in the standard English translation. Calvin's entrée for the whole work is this: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."⁷ We must know God; and we must know ourselves. These two

“knowledges” are correlative, related to each other in such a way that in order to do the one, we must do the other. We see that Calvin was not merely about increasing his readers’ data set; he didn’t just want to give them more information. His labors had a relational end. His goal was to bring his readers into a relationship with the living God, and this relationship would be enriched as they understood themselves—and themselves in relation to God—better.

Just a few pages later, Calvin gives us another glimpse into the pastoral motivation for the *Institutes*. His goal in this work is to develop heart-felt “piety” in his readers.⁸ This piety will lead them into a growing, more vibrant *relationship* with the Lord. Note his logic:

I call “piety” that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. 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. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.⁹

He goes on to elaborate this even more. True knowledge of God, he notes, is extremely relational and affectionate. It’s this knowledge he desires for his readers. “What help is it,” he asks, “to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?” True knowledge of God leads to two vibrant realities in a person’s life: first, it teaches one to “fear and reverence” the sovereign Lord; second, “with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and, having received it, to credit it to his account.”¹⁰ We see, then, that Calvin’s goal is not just more intellectual understanding on the part of his readers. The intellectual understanding he hopes to impart throughout the *Institutes* has two tangible goals. Whether or not these goals are met in his readers will, in effect, determine if they

have begun the journey to have true knowledge of God. On the one hand, he hopes that God will be honored as believers learn more about him and show him greater reverence. On the other hand, he desires that believers will worship God more wholeheartedly and seek their every good from him. He thus ends the second brief chapter of the work by summarizing his goal. He desires for his readers “pure and real religion” which is “faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law.”¹¹ Pure religion, according to Pastor Calvin, is gauged by its tangible effects in one’s life.¹²

It would be well worth your time to read and ponder Calvin’s first two chapters in the *Institutes*, which are just nine pages long, if you’ve not had the opportunity to do that before. But I want to try to do three other things in an attempt to outline the contours of Calvin’s pastoral theology. First, I will try to quickly sketch out for us John Calvin’s “pastoral vision.” Second, I will briefly note the important role Calvin assigns to pastors as the central human agents in implementing and teaching this pastoral vision. Third, I will show the way that Calvin applied this pastoral vision in two instances in the *Institutes*.

“PASTORAL VISION”

Let’s first of all then notice Calvin’s “pastoral vision.” As far as I know, Calvin never used the word “worldview” to speak of this. But that is what I am attempting to unpack in Calvin. What was Calvin’s pastoral worldview, his vision of reality that influenced what he did, wrote, preached, and prayed? Like you and me, Calvin believed things that deeply influenced his pastoral practice. I think we can see that vision encompassing five different aspects.

The first aspect of Calvin’s pastoral vision is the glorious God. God is the one constant reality in the universe. Although Calvin does not include a section elaborating on the existence and attributes of God—except for a rather brief discussion of the divine Trinity, the Lord is in many

ways the central actor in the *Institutes*. He is the sovereign King, around whom everything in his creation revolves. Thus he truly is the Lord. He is holy and majestic, and therefore all worship is due to him. We are all obligated, thus, to adore him: “Adoration,” says Calvin, “I call the veneration and worship that each of us, in submitting to [God’s] greatness, renders to him.”¹³ We submit to God’s greatness and give him worship. “We should wish,” Calvin observes, “God to have the honor he deserves; men should never speak or think of him without the highest reverence.”¹⁴ In addition to being gloriously majestic, the Lord is also the Father of his children. Therefore, they are to find their joy in knowing him. Calvin stresses throughout the *Institutes* that sinners—dead in their sin and confirmed in their opposition to God—cannot save themselves. God must do that, and he does that through his regenerating activity. There is no such reality as “free will” in sinners that allows them to seek spiritual good; for that they require “special grace, which only the elect receive through regeneration.”¹⁵ In another place, Calvin very affectionately recounts that the Lord gives us “great occasion” “to contemplate his mercy” by often pursuing “miserable sinners with unwearied kindness, until he shatters their wickedness by imparting benefits and by recalling them to him with more than fatherly kindness!”¹⁶ So, Christians should rejoice in God and find their greatest joy in knowing him and being forgiven by him.

The second aspect of Calvin’s pastoral vision is his view of humanity. Remember, Calvin stresses that we must know ourselves if we are to know God better. So, what must we know about ourselves? What did Pastor Calvin know about the people he was shepherding?

We could begin by noting Calvin’s discussion in Book One, on God the Creator, where he recounts that as those who are the creatures we are absolutely dependent on God. God not only created us, but he sustains our every breath, and providentially does all for us. We are absolutely dependent on him. The fact that we are created in

God’s image brings great potential to humanity—not the least of which is knowing the living Lord. The problem, though, is that the image has been starkly shattered through Adam’s sin.¹⁷ As those with great potential, then, we require someone outside of us to save us. This becomes the foundation for later “Calvinism’s” soteriology and its emphasis on monergism, the necessity of God’s saving his people.

But I want to trace out Calvin’s view of humanity from more of a pastoral angle. Calvin believed that persons were extremely complicated. They can be viewed from several perspectives, all of which need to be engaged by God’s truth if it is to result in their eternal good. Of course, people are thinking beings. That’s why Calvin taught them the truth, so that they would *know* the truth and be conformed to it. That point alone accounts for the almost Herculean efforts of the reformer to explain, comment on, and preach biblical truth for most of his adult life. But we must note that Calvin believed people were more than intellects. They were also affectionate beings, filled with *love* for various things. These affections were often misplaced, so that if men were not honoring the true God they will almost have to find some false god to reverence because of their very nature to love *some thing*. This recognition of people’s God-given affectionate nature probably accounts for Calvin’s desire to have the Psalms sung in Christian worship; music was a gift of God useful in tuning the affections of God’s people towards him. It also explains Calvin’s stark—and sometimes surprising—affectionate language about the importance of loving God our Father. Christians are those who should be growing in love for God in our piety and who should take more and more joy in knowing Christ. But there’s yet a third aspect to human nature; we’re more than knowing and loving beings. We’re also beings who have, and who seek, *experiences*. Calvin did not deny the experiential importance of knowing God. Perhaps we see this aspect of persons most strikingly in Calvin’s explanation of what takes place when a Chris-

tian receives the Lord's Supper. Although Calvin has numerous definite things to assert about the eucharist, at one point he admits that he cannot define exactly what transpires when a Christian receives the elements. Ultimately, it's a "mystery, which I see that I do not even sufficiently comprehend with my mind." So Calvin continues,

I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher than I can lead them. For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. [Do you sense Calvin's experiences here?] Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express.¹⁸

The eucharist is something a Christian ultimately experiences, even though its significance cannot be finally understood.

Calvin didn't try to dichotomize these components of human nature. He addressed his congregation—and his readers—as multifaceted, complicated people. And all of our being needs to be engaged with biblical reality so that we not only know ourselves but also grow in knowledge of God—as we know him and his care for us, as we grow in love towards him, and as we experience his goodness and faithfulness to us. Indeed, I believe that you see Calvin alluding to each of these three components in humanity in his discussion of "piety" and "true religion" that we looked at previously.

The third aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision concerns the chief mark of a Christian, faith in Jesus Christ. Faith—belief in Christ and trust in his death for you—is the chief defining point of a Christian, according to Calvin. So the reformer takes pains to stress the sufficiency of Christ's

death for sinners. There is nothing lacking in the atoning work of the Mediator that should leave us trembling before the judgment seat of God. No, Christ has made complete atonement. And, even more than that, by faith a believer is now united with Christ. Present union with Christ is, in fact, one of Calvin's chief doctrines. These derive from faith, which Calvin defines as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."¹⁹ So, Calvin viewed his congregation as those saved by the mercy of the Father, through the sacrifice of the Son, granted faith by the Holy Spirit, and presently united to Christ by faith.

Although we might conclude from this that Calvin, therefore, viewed the life of a Christian as a comfortable, easy period on the way to heaven, this would be to neglect the fourth aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision. Calvin thought the life of a Christian was a battle, an extremely difficult pilgrimage as the believer wearily struggled to get to his final home in heaven.²⁰ And the battle, according to Calvin, was brutal. It involved spiritual forces that were out to shipwreck the faith of Christians—if that were possible. Not only were Christians assaulted by spiritual forces outside of themselves, but they were also hindered by their remaining sin. The life of a Christian was thus a life of denying himself; a life of continual repentance exemplified in the habit of bearing Christ's cross by humbly submitting to God. One of Calvin's great pastoral burdens was, thus, not just to strengthen his readers for the battle. It was also to remind them that the battle—with its many attendant hardships—was normal. This is what they should expect in this life. Calvin spells this out in great detail in the only part of the *Institutes* that was published as a separate entity during his lifetime, his discussion of the Christian life in Book 3. But he alludes to it in other places as well. For example, while refuting Servetus's over-realized eschatology, Calvin observes,

I admit, indeed, that in believing Christ we at once pass from death into life. But at the same time we must remember that saying of John's: although we know that "we are the children of God, it does not yet appear ... until we shall become like him, when we shall see him as he is." Although, therefore, Christ offers us in the gospel a present fullness of spiritual benefits, the enjoyment thereof ever lies hidden under the guardianship of hope, until, having put off corruptible flesh, we be transfigured in the glory of him who goes before us. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit bids us rely upon the promises, whose authority with us ought to silence all the barking of that unclean dog [Servetus].²¹

The fifth aspect of Calvin's pastoral vision was its eternal scope. We've already seen the manner in which Calvin spoke of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. The pilgrimage was a journey to heaven for believers. At the final resurrection, in heaven, they would experience God's gracious presence in its fullness. Unbelievers, however, would receive eternal punishment for their proud dismissal of God's lordship in their lives. This eternal reality influenced all that Calvin did as a pastor. He was shepherding people who would live forever—either in God's glorious presence in joy, or suffering God's wrathful vengeance in hell.²² Heaven would be glorious, and Calvin urged his readers to think often of its truthfulness, especially since in this life "hardships distress us." "He alone," Calvin asserts, "has fully profited in the gospel who has accustomed himself to continual meditation upon the blessed resurrection."²³ We see his pastoral heart shining forth when he encourages his readers that, although we can't speak definitively about our experience of heaven now, in that day "in the very sight of it there will be such pleasantness, such sweetness in the knowledge of it alone ... that this happiness will far surpass all the amenities that we now enjoy."²⁴ On the other hand, hell would be awful; its reality should, in an opposite fashion, fill unbelievers with dread. Hell is eternal

in nature because "God's majesty, and also his justice, which they have violated by sinning, are eternal."²⁵ So Calvin presses upon his readers the dreadful reality of hell:

Because no description can deal adequately with the gravity of God's vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is, by darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth, unquenchable fire, an undying worm gnawing at the heart. By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread.... So we ought especially to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched it is to be cut off from all fellowship with God. And not that only but so to feel his sovereign power against you that you cannot escape being pressed by it.²⁶

John Calvin pastored with eternity—and the eternal condition of his listeners and readers—always in his mind.

This, then, is the outline of Calvin's pastoral worldview. First, its God-centeredness. Second, its robust view of humanity. Third, its stress on the work of Christ and the necessity of trusting him. Fourth, its admission that the Christian life is the path of a difficult pilgrimage. And, fifth, its eternal focus.

THE ROLE OF THE PASTOR IN IMPLEMENTING THIS "PASTORAL VISION"

Now, we can look briefly at Calvin's view of the role of the pastor in the implementation of this "pastoral vision." First of all, we can note Calvin's own statements about the role of a pastor.²⁷ The pastor of God's church "is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable."²⁸ The pastor is not to hide the realities of life; rather, he is to strengthen believers for the battle they are in. Calvin makes a similar statement in his discussion on the value of a Christian privately speaking about his troubles to his pastor; "he should beg

the private help of him whose duty it is,” Calvin reminds his readers, “both publicly and privately to comfort the people of God by the gospel teaching.”²⁹ The pastor’s role, wedded to the teaching of the word, is to bring comfort to those who by grace are God’s children.

In Book Four, “The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein,”—the longest of the four books in the *Institutes*—Calvin speaks at length about the role of the pastor. He notes there that the pastor’s task is essential to the growth, edification, and perseverance of the church.³⁰ The pastor is essential not only as a counselor and comforter; he is also essential as a preacher of truth and an example of faithfulness in the midst of the Christian pilgrimage. God is the only one who can change Christians; more than that, he is the only one who can sustain them in the hardships of life on their journey to heaven. So, his voice must be heard in the church. And his voice is heard through the voice of the preacher. Thus Calvin notes that “among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is the singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.”³¹

It is for this reason that throughout the *Institutes* Calvin argues that the word of God and the Spirit of God function in tandem with each other. The error of groups such as the Catholic Church and the radical Anabaptists is that they in effect try to separate the Spirit of God from his word. But a faithful pastor will not do that. He will recognize that the Spirit functions by giving and sustaining vital Christian life through his word preached. Therefore, he will preach the word. And, lastly, he will model this very same word for believers. Calvin stresses the importance of evident piety in the lives of pastors. “Learning joined with piety”³² is Calvin’s way of speaking of the requirements of a pastor. Or, as he also says, the only ones who should be chosen by the church to be their pastors are ones “who are of sound doctrine and of holy

life.”³³ In this the church needs to trust the Lord to supply them with orthodox and pious pastors, for “[t]hose whom the Lord has destined for such a high office, he first supplies with the arms required to fulfill it, that they may not come empty-handed and unprepared.”³⁴ The living God must be heard by his people. And he will be heard by them; he does it as pastors faithfully proclaim his word to his people and as they try to model to his people true Christian piety.

APPLICATION OF PASTORAL VISION

Now I want to move into our third section. Here I want to show the way in which Calvin operated pastorally in two particular doctrines in the *Institutes*. These two—first, God’s sovereignty in providence and predestination, and, second, the purpose of prayer in the Christian’s life—are just helpful examples of what we see Calvin doing in the pages of the *Institutes*. Throughout, Calvin makes two regular pastoral applications: first, the necessity of submitting to and adoring the sovereign God and, second, Calvin’s desire to comfort weary Christians by reminding them of the reality of their sovereign heavenly Father. These pastoral applications permeate all of the *Institutes*.

God’s Sovereignty in Providence and Predestination

First, then, we will notice the manner in which Calvin dealt with the sovereign authority of God, especially as he presented it in his discussion of providence and predestination. We need to note first of all that Calvin carefully defines his understanding of providence: “Providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events.”³⁵

In the course of his discussion of providence, Calvin takes pains to differentiate carefully his understanding from numerous deviations from the truth. On the one hand, Calvin’s is not a fatalistic doctrine. In providentially governing his creation, the Lord makes use of secondary agents who

do what they want to do, yet who, in the process, are culpable for their choices. The Lord is thus completely sovereign, but he never sins. On the other hand, Calvin spends much of his discussion defending the point, as he says, that “nothing at all in the world is undertaken without [God’s] determination.”³⁶ God determines everything that happens. He is in complete, absolute control of everything that occurs in his creation. Everything. Even that which is difficult for us to understand and which may be hard for us to accept. Our weaknesses do not limit God’s authority.

But what is Calvin’s pastoral reason for stressing God’s perfect, sovereign providence? Fortunately the reformer does not leave us wondering but tells us explicitly what his two pastoral motivations are. So, first of all, he notes that only such a doctrinal presentation glorifies God. People who deny God’s complete providence “defraud God of his glory.”³⁷ Any presentation that neuters God’s involvement and carrying out of his purpose in the world is not only an error. One may even be motivated by a desire to get God “off the hook” for evil. As well-intentioned as Calvin’s detractors may be, though, nevertheless they are robbing God of his glory. The Lord will be known and worshiped as the One whose “will is said to be the cause of all things.... [H]is providence [is] the determinative principle for all human plans and works.”³⁸ A biblical notion of providence thus honors God the creator and sustainer.

On the other hand, only this robust view of God’s providential ordering of the universe can comfort Christians in this troubled life. Calvin notes this in the same context where he initially argues that providence alone brings glory to God. There he says that “in times of adversity believers comfort themselves with the solace that they suffer nothing except by God’s ordinance and command, for they are under his hand.” Those who fight against the doctrine of providence thus deny themselves “a most profitable doctrine.”³⁹ Calvin the pastor calls on his readers to submit to the clear testimony of Scripture. It is for our good that we do

this.⁴⁰ In fact, nothing can be more profitable for a Christian than to be convinced of this truth.⁴¹ If one does not believe God’s perfect providence, you have entered treacherous waters where the evil and unbounded forces of the world can have their way with the Christian. In a sense, the non-providence-believing-Christian is stupidly denying himself the precious certainty of God’s fatherly care for him.⁴² So Calvin urges his readers to trust tenaciously in God’s providence because of the numerous benefits which will come into such a person’s life.⁴³ That person will display “gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future,” says Calvin.⁴⁴

We see, then, the way in which Calvin pastorally frames his discussion of providence. He appeals to two goods which result from a Christian’s holding to this biblical truth. God is glorified. And the Christian is comforted. The two are not antithetical but work perfectly together for a believer who is growing in piety to reverence and love his God. As Calvin states, a Christian restrains himself “from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone; but, because [he] loves and reveres God as Father, [he] worships and adores him as Lord.”⁴⁵ God receives the worship that is his due, and the Christian believer is comforted in knowing God as his heavenly Father.

We can be briefer in pointing out Calvin’s pastoral emphases in his discussion of predestination, since in many ways this doctrine is a specific application of God’s providence, according to Calvin. Predestination is God sovereignly determining from eternity past whom he will graciously save and whom he will justly condemn.⁴⁶ Calvin does not shy away from asserting that this predestination activity of God is “double,” encompassing both those elected for salvation and those elected for damnation. “We call predestination God’s eternal decree,” says Calvin, “by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal

damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.⁴⁷ Or, as he asserts in another place,

As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation.⁴⁸

Calvin spends a great deal of time noting the biblical rationale for this assertion. As he says, the doctrine must be taught because it highlights in poignant fashion that God's grace is the reason for our salvation, and in this God is glorified.⁴⁹

But of great interest to us in the pastoral usefulness of this doctrine according to Calvin. First of all, Calvin points out that belief in this doctrine—according to which God is both the sole efficient agent of salvation and the just judge of those condemned to hell—functions at one level to glorify God. The Lord stands out according to this doctrine as “the Lord.” No one can oppose his desire to act as he chooses. This is especially clear in the case of the reprobate, those whom God determines will be damned. In discussing the Lord's rejection of Esau, for instance, Calvin notes that it would have been most easy for the Lord to say that he rejected Esau because of the evil works he performed. But he didn't do that. Rather, God “contents himself with a different solution, that the reprobate are raised up to the end that through them God's glory may be revealed.”⁵⁰ Throughout his discussion, Calvin argues that we must let God determine what God will determine about persons; his will alone will be done. Rather than seeking to implicate God for injustice in election,

we must remember that “God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he willed it, must be considered righteous.”⁵¹ We must not be embarrassed to discuss this doctrine, as if God were embarrassed by it. If he were, he wouldn't have put it in Scripture. Calvin notes this while commenting on Rom 9:20-21. Paul, he notes, “did not look for loopholes of escape as if he were embarrassed in his argument but showed that the reason of divine righteousness is higher than man's standard can measure, or than man's slender wit can comprehend.”⁵² In this fact God will be glorified.

In a similar fashion, belief in God's predestinating activity should have salutary effects in a believer's life, according to Calvin. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of the Reformer's doctrine of predestination—he believes it should comfort believers rather than cause them to despair! Predestination is “very sweet fruit,” he says. Have you heard double predestination presented in that way!? It's sweet to the Christian, because “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, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others.”⁵³ It's sweetness, then, comes from seeing the completely gracious character of our salvation. If you want comfort, look to God's election. Look to it by asking if you have faith in Christ. If you trust in Christ, you can be assured of your election because, says Calvin, “it is certain that faith is a singular pledge of the Father's love, reserved for the sons whom he has adopted.” “No man,” he says, “makes himself a sheep but is made one by heavenly grace.”⁵⁴

According to Calvin predestination is also “sweet fruit” because it leads a believer to have assurance of salvation, for the God who elected and granted faith to the Christian will sustain him throughout his life. As Calvin argues, “For those whom Christ has illumined with the knowledge

of his name and has introduced into the bosom of his church, he is said to receive into his care and keeping. All whom he receives, the Father is said to have entrusted and committed to him to keep unto eternal life.”⁵⁵ Rather than asking if God’s love for us will remain constant, believers may be convinced “that they are out of danger of falling away because the Son of God, asking that their godliness be kept constant, did not suffer a refusal. What did Christ wish to have us learn from this but to trust that we shall ever remain safe because we have been made his once for all?”⁵⁶

Another benefit of belief in this doctrine, according to Pastor Calvin, is that it teaches a believer humility. Several times throughout the *Institutes* Calvin notes that humility should be the defining mark of a Christian. For example, he quotes Augustine approvingly who commented that “When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, ‘Delivery’; what was the second rule, ‘Delivery’; what was the third rule, ‘Delivery’; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, ‘Humility.’”⁵⁷ This should be a joy, not a cause of discomfort, for a Christian. For one who knows he is saved only because of God’s grace, and who is resting in this salvation, humility can result without the fear that a Christian must just “maintain appearances.” The only thing that matters is God’s loving election. Thus, Calvin argues that nothing will

suffice to make us humble as we ought to be nor shall we otherwise sincerely feel how much we are obliged to God [as the truth of election]. And as Christ teaches, here is our only ground for firmness and confidence: ... he promises that whoever the Father has entrusted into his keeping will be safe. From this we infer that all those who do not know that they are God’s own will be miserable through constant fear.⁵⁸

Predestination’s “intent is that, humbled and cast down, we may learn to tremble at his judgment and esteem his mercy. It is at this mark that believers aim.”⁵⁹ When a Christian recognizes this, he can both think rightly about God’s glory and honestly look at himself.

The Purpose of Prayer in the Christian’s Life

As we move into a discussion of Calvin on prayer we see him using the same rubric to direct his readers’ attention to the God-glorifying and soul-comforting aim of prayer. By way of introduction, we see Calvin’s pastoral motivation by including a discussion of prayer in this book. We might not expect to see that in a “dry theological tome.” But this is no academically-oriented systematic; this is a pastoral treatise. Nor should we overlook the fact that Calvin’s chapter on prayer is the longest one in the *Institutes*.⁶⁰ He obviously felt it was an important subject for his readers to know something about.

Why, though? What is the motivation of prayer, according to Calvin? In order to introduce this subject, let me first give you a couple of quotes from Calvin which show the intensity with which he pressed on his readers their obligation to pray. Notice the affective language that he uses as he pleads with them to be ever more active in praying.

After we have been instructed by faith to recognize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him. Otherwise, to know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not go to him and not ask of him—this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him.⁶¹

Similarly, Calvin notes,

It is, therefore, by the *benefit of prayer* that we reach those *riches* which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father. For there is a *communion* of men with God by which, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, they appeal to him *in person* concerning his promises in order to *experience*, where necessity demands, that what they believed was not vain, although he had promised it in word alone. *Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true it is that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.*⁶²

If I had more space, I would have liked to address the topic of Calvin's teaching on prayer because I think it is *very* insightful and challenging for evangelicals who have more of a doctrinal orientation. It is so helpful to remember that this same man also espoused double predestination! If you've never read the *Institutes* before, you can't do better than begin by reading Calvin on prayer.

Rather, I will address Calvin's pastoral vision regarding prayer. First of all, we see again that for Calvin one reason to pray was that it honored God as the sovereign Lord to whom his people looked for their every need. Prayer does not tell God anything he does not already know. Nor does it twist his arm to help us, as if he needed us to convince him to be good to us! No, God is glorified as we pray to him because in praying we acknowledge that he is the Sovereign with both the will and the power to help us.

We see this throughout Calvin's lengthy discussion. God is glorified, he says, when we pray because it reminds us of his sovereign providence in caring for us.⁶³ In the act of prayer, "we give ourselves over to his care, and entrust ourselves to his providence, that he may feed, nourish, and preserve us."⁶⁴ For this reason, then, we need to approach God reverently in prayer—in fact, Cal-

vin labels this the first rule of prayer. We are not playing games but are coming to the King. So Calvin reminds us that "the only persons who duly and properly gird themselves to pray" are the ones who are "moved by God's majesty" when they come before him.⁶⁵ Our support when we come to God in prayer is his promises, not our merit. Again, this brings glory to God, "inasmuch as our prayers depend upon no merit of ours, but their whole worth and hope of fulfillment are grounded in God's promises, and depend upon them."⁶⁶ The only worth of our prayers, the only hope of their being answered comes from God. He receives the honor in this. So, Calvin reminds his readers that in prayer "we should wish God to have the honor he deserves; men should never speak or think of him without the highest reverence."⁶⁷ As we remember to whom we pray, and why it is that we need to look outside of ourselves and come to him in the first place, God receives glory for being recognized by us as the Sovereign King.

But Calvin does not stop with that point. Scattered throughout his discussion of prayer is the second of his two emphases—Christians are comforted as we bring our concerns to God, whom we know can meet our needs. We already heard Calvin say, "It is, therefore, by the *benefit of prayer* that we reach those *riches* which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father."⁶⁸ Calvin stresses that our great comfort in prayer is that we come to God as our Father. Thus, he says, because we are certain of our adoption by God, "we embrace this great blessing with sure faith" and it plays itself out in our prayers.⁶⁹ "By the sweetness of this name, [Father]," Calvin notes, "he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father. Therefore he could not attest his own boundless love toward us with any surer proof than that fact that we are called 'children of God.'"⁷⁰ It is for our comfort, then, that God adopts us as his children, and it is for our good that he grants us the privilege of prayer. In his comments on Jesus' first address in the Lord's Prayer, Calvin makes this striking conclusion:

To strengthen our assurance that he is this sort of father to us if we are Christians, he willed that we call him not only “Father” but explicitly “our Father.” It is as if we addressed him: “O Father, who dost abound with great devotion toward thy children, and with great readiness to forgive, we thy children call upon thee and make our prayer, assured and clearly persuaded that thou bearest toward us only the affection of a father, although we are unworthy of such a father.”⁷¹

Thus, because of the great comfort that comes with praying, and as a means to further our communion with our Heavenly Father, Pastor Calvin urges his readers—and us—to pray. I conclude by noting once again Calvin’s affectionate language when speaking about this chief exercise of faith. He warns his readers that “the godly must particularly beware of presenting themselves before God to request anything unless they *yearn* for it with *sincere affection of heart*, and at the same time desire to obtain it from him.”⁷² Affectionately, then, with an eye towards our comfort, we should pray.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I would like to make two applications in light of what I have said. First of all, I would urge you to read Calvin’s *Institutes*. Not only is this year the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth; it is also the 450th anniversary of the publication of Calvin’s final edition of his masterpiece. It is one of the very few works from the sixteenth century that is still important for us to read, today. If your desire—as I hope it is—is to glorify God, find comfort in Christ, and arrive safely in heaven, after reading the Bible, I don’t know that you can do yourself any more good than to spend time *pondering*, being *affected* by, and *experiencing* the wonder of God’s sovereignty and goodness as presented in the *Institutes*. (Remember Calvin’s three perspectives of viewing the complexities of humanity.)

Second, for those of you whom God has called

to pastor Christ’s church, I would urge you to evaluate Calvin’s five-fold pastoral vision to see if it is biblical. If it is—and I am convinced it is—then seek to model your pastoral duties on its foundation. There is so much in our culture, in our churches, and in ourselves (!) that works against our seeking to pastor in a God-honoring fashion. If Calvin can help us to honor the Lord and bring comfort to God’s people more, then by all means let us use and profit from him.

ENDNOTES

¹These various quotes are from *Christian History* 5, no. 4 (1985): 2-3.

²Jerome Bolsec, *Histoire de la vie, moeurs, actes, doctrines, constance et mort de Jean Calvin (1577)*, 12; in *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 210.

³A helpful survey of Calvin’s pastoral ministry, drawn largely from his letters is found in Richard Stauffer, *The Humanness of John Calvin* (trans. George Shriver; Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 72-93. Other useful resources include Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Worker, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 131-218; and W. Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 58-192.

⁴For an overview of Calvin’s numerous writings, including his pastoral compositions, see Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (trans. Lyle D. Bierma; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993). On Calvin’s churchly orientation, see Timothy George, “Introduction,” in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* (ed. Timothy George; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 15-26. A wonderful treatment of Calvin’s pastoral writings and his piety, including many selections from his writings, is Elsie Anne McKee, ed., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 2001).

⁵“Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is undoubtedly a great work of theology and a demon-

stration that Calvin is one of the great theologians in the history of the church. But ever more the *Institutes* demonstrate that Calvin is always the pastor stressing the essential elements of true religion” (Godfrey, *John Calvin*, 192).

⁶E. G. Rupp helpfully notes about the *Institutes* that “it was much more than a theological compendium for the learned. This exposition of the economy of redemption was also a prospectus of the Church militant on earth, a handbook for Christian warriors” (“The Swiss Reformers and the Sects,” in *The New Cambridge Modern History, Vol. 2: The Reformation, 1520-1559* [ed. G. R. Elton; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1958], 117).

⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.1.1; p. 35.

⁸On Calvin’s emphasis on piety, see Joel R. Beeke, “Calvin on Piety,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 125-52. Also, note Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 189-91.

⁹*Institutes* 1.2.1; p. 41.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 1.2.2; pp. 41-42.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 1.2.2; p. 43.

¹²For a helpful overview of Calvin’s spirituality, see James E. McGoldrick, “John Calvin, Practical Theologian: The Reformer’s Spirituality,” in *Reformed Spirituality: Communion with Our Glorious God* (ed. Joseph A. Pipa Jr. and J. Andrew Wortman; Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian, 2003), 43-60.

¹³*Institutes* 2.8.16; p. 382.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 3.20.41; p. 904.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 2.2.6; p. 262.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 1.5.7; p. 60.

¹⁷For a very helpful survey of Calvin’s view of humanity’s sin see Michael S. Horton, “A Shattered Vase: The Tragedy of Sin in Calvin’s Thought,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 151-67. Also see George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 213-16.

¹⁸*Institutes* 4.17.6; p. 1367.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 3.2.7; p. 551. On Calvin’s teaching on the work of Christ and the importance of faith see George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 219-28; Robert A. Peterson, “Calvin on Christ’s Saving Work,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*, 226-47; and Joel R. Beeke, “Appropriating Salvation: The Spirit, Faith and Assurance, and Repentance,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*, 270-300.

²⁰See Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim’s Life* (trans. Albert Grootjes; Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 2009) for a useful biographical study of Calvin built around the theme of the life of the Christian as the journey of a pilgrim.

²¹*Institutes* 2.9.3; p. 426.

²²*Ibid.*, 3.25.5; p. 995.

²³*Ibid.*, 3.25.2, 1; pp. 989, 988.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 3.25.11; p. 1007.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 3.25.5; p. 996.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 3.25.12; pp. 1007-08.

²⁷See George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 241-44.

²⁸*Institutes* 1.14.4; p. 164.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 3.4.12; p. 637.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 4.1.5; p. 1017.

³¹*Ibid.*, 4.1.5; p. 1018.

³²*Ibid.*, 4.3.11; p. 1063.

³³*Ibid.*, 4.3.12; p. 1063.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 4.3.11; p. 1063.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 1.16.4; p. 202. See George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 204-13; and Joseph A. Pipa Jr., “Creation and Providence,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*, 123-50.

³⁶*Institutes* 1.16.6; p. 205.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 1.16.3; p. 200.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 1.18.2; p. 232.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 1.16.3; p. 200.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 1.18.4; p. 237.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 1.17.3; p. 215.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 1.16.5; p. 204.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 1.17.8; p. 221.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 1.17.7; p. 219.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 1.2.2; p. 43.

⁴⁶See George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 231-34; and R. Scott Clark, “Election and Predestination: The Sovereign Expressions of God,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*, 90-122.

⁴⁷*Institutes* 3.21.5; p. 926.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 3.21.7; p. 931.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 3.21.1; p. 921.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 3.22.11; p. 947.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 3.23.2; p. 949.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 3.23.4; p. 951.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 3.21.1; p. 921.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 3.22.10; p. 946.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 3.24.6; p. 971.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 3.24.6; p. 973.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 2.2.11; pp. 268-69.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 3.21.1; p. 922.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 3.23.12; p. 960.

⁶⁰See George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 228-31; and David B. Calhoun, "Prayer: 'The Chief Exercise of Faith,'" in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, 347-67.

⁶¹*Institutes* 3.20.1; p. 850.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 3.20.2, p. 851 (emphasis added).

⁶³*Ibid.*, 3.20.3; p. 853.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 3.20.44; p. 908.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 3.20.5; p. 854.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 3.20.14; p. 868.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 3.20.41; p. 904.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 3.20.2; p. 851.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 3.20.36; p. 899.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 3.20.36; p. 899.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 3.20.37; p. 900.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 3.20.6; p. 857.