

EVANGELISM (MISSION COMMITTEE)

Greetings to you, in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Let us continue to encourage one another and continue to pray about the much needed work which is required in the mission field. In this respect, the mission committee would like to share with you something about the work which the C16th Reformers were involved in. Mission work requires much sacrifice and perseverance. Do take time to read about some of this work done by one of God's faithful laborers. We would also like to encourage each one of us to think about how we, likewise, as His chosen people, can imitate such good work. And by God's grace, and may we continue to remain zealous and active in spreading the Word to others.

The Mission Labors of John Calvin (taken from the Standard Bearer)

The sixteenth century saw a Roman Catholic focus on overseas missions that had no parallel. The Catholic Church aggressively promoted its false doctrine throughout the known world, making use of the sword as its chief evangelism tool. Opportunities that were available to the Roman Catholics in terms of traveling with and living under the protection of explorers and commercial companies were not available to their Protestant counterparts. As a result, the Reformers of the sixteenth century are often accused of failing to be mission minded.

But we contend that the Reformers were mission minded, even in the face of tremendous opposition. God used the Reformation to initiate Bible translations, to bring thousands of people out of darkness into the light of the truth, and to spread the gospel throughout Europe and even to America. The Reformation itself was a massive domestic mission movement, with at least one important foreign element. This was evident especially through the work of John Calvin. It is falsely claimed that the theology of the Reformers limited the vision of their missionary labors. First, it is said that the Reformers interpreted the great commission of Matthew 28:19, 20 as applying to the New Testament apostles alone. Second, the accusation is made that the doctrine of election made missions unnecessary since God had already chosen those whom He would save.

Regarding the great commission, the argument of the Reformers was not intended to undermine the necessity of present missions. Both Luther and Calvin (see his commentaries on Isaiah 12:5; 45:23, and Matthew 24:14, 19) spoke of the necessity of the gospel being preached to all nations by the church of their day. It is important to understand the context in which the Reformers presented their argument regarding the great commission. They were taking issue with the Roman Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession, which stated that the succession of bishops, in uninterrupted lines, is historically traceable back to the original twelve apostles. Luther and Calvin insisted that the apostolic age was limited to the time of the apostles and ceased at their death. Into that discussion they brought the teaching of Matthew 28:19, 20 to argue that the apostles were given and had begun that commission.

Secondly, both Luther and Calvin rejected the accusation that the doctrine of election made missions unnecessary. Luther zealously preached and taught the gospel to those in bondage to the Catholic faith. Luther was instrumental in getting the Bible back into the hands of the German people in their own language. Hundreds and thousands of people who previously had never read the Bible now came into direct contact with the word of God.

John Calvin wrote that the view that election makes missions unnecessary fails to do justice to the preached word. God uses the preaching of the gospel to draw His elect to Him. Since we do not know where the elect are, the gospel must be preached as widely as God by His good pleasure gives opportunity. Quoting Augustine, Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, 3.23.14, "For as we know not who belongs to the number of the predestined or who does not belong, we ought to be so minded as to wish that all men be saved." John Calvin demonstrated a mission-mindedness that the Reformed churches embraced and preserved.

Calvin, as the most mission minded of the Reformers, was directly involved in both domestic and foreign missions. Calvin trained and sent hundreds of pastors/missionaries to various countries in Europe. He also commissioned and sent missionaries overseas to establish a colony and evangelize the native Indians of Brazil.

Let us first look at Calvin's domestic missions, especially in terms of France. In 1555 there were only a few Protestant churches in all of France. Within seven years there were over two thousand churches, most of which were indebted to John Calvin's labors. How could this come to pass?

As the books of Martin Luther trickled into France during the early days of the Reformation, a considerable movement began through the secret reading of these volumes. The Roman Catholic Church dominated France, and the persecution that came upon those who defected from Catholicism was fierce. Many Reformed people, most from well educated, upper middle class families, fled France and other parts of Europe and came to Calvin's home of Geneva, making Geneva, literally, a refugee center.

Many of the men felt called to continue the work of the Reformation, so Calvin set up a theological school in order to train many of the refugees for the ministry. Calvin provided a thorough, intense training, which prepared these men to be expository preachers of the gospel.

It is difficult to know for sure how many missionaries were sent back to France, because the persecution hindered the keeping of open records. We know for certain that, from 1555 until 1562, eighty-eight Frenchmen were trained as preachers and sent from Geneva back into France. Some historians claim that in the year 1561 alone an additional one hundred forty men were sent out, as requests for pastors came to Geneva from all over France.

Fred Koster writes: "The mission activity that emanated from Geneva under Calvin's inspiration was itself of monumental proportions. It was perhaps the greatest home missions project that history has yet seen since the time of the apostles" (Fred H. Koster, "Missions—The Heidelberg Catechism and Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal*, November 1972).

Calvin, knowing the persecution that they would face, demanded that these men not only be equipped with the necessary theological training, but that they also possess the necessary stamina and courage to face martyrdom. We know that at least nine of these men gave their lives as martyrs.

Using the work of Calvin as the means, God brought about extraordinary growth in His church. By 1562 there were 2,150 Protestant churches in France. Eventually there would be over two million Protestants out of the French population of twenty million. And this church growth took place in the context of tremendous oppression. In the year 1572 alone 70,000 Protestants were killed in France.

As God gave him opportunity, Calvin also undertook the difficult labor of foreign missions. The oceans during the time were ruled by the fleets of Spain and Portugal. Only Roman Catholic priests and monastic orders were allowed the right of travel in order to evangelize the new world. It was not until after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 that other countries were able to travel the waters with freedom.

However, a Frenchman named Nicolas Durant de Villegagnon, a classmate of John Calvin in Paris, decided on a daring adventure. He decided to travel to Brazil in order to establish a French colony that might provide relief for the Protestants who were being persecuted in France and Spain. With the blessing of Coligny, the Grand Admiral of France, and Henry II of England, Villegagnon sailed on November 10, 1555 and reached Rio de Janeiro after four months. Soon after setting up a fort he sent back to Coligny for reinforcements and asked for ministers to evangelize the natives. Coligny contacted John Calvin, who was overjoyed at this opportunity to spread the gospel to America. Calvin presented the request to the church at Geneva and two ministers and eleven lay persons committed to the mission. They sailed for Brazil in September of 1556. The two pastors, Pierre Richier and Guillaume Chartier, began to organize a church in Fort Coligny as soon as they arrived and with joy and thankfulness to God held their first communion service in Brazil in March of 1557.

All did not go well with the young church, however. Soon Villegagnon began to interfere in the church by demanding practices that were in line with Roman Catholicism. Villegagnon treated Calvin's emissaries harshly and began to talk of John Calvin as a heretic. Some of the men were able to return to Geneva, but others were killed by Villegagnon or made slaves. Villegagnon returned to France for supplies in 1560 and the Portuguese attacked and destroyed the fort, thus bringing the French colony in Brazil to an end.

From every earthly perspective, the Genevan mission to Brazil was a complete failure. There were no converts, and many men lost their lives. There was frustration with the language barrier and the spiritual blindness of the natives. However, letters exchanged between the missionaries and Calvin revealed faithfulness on the part of those who labored in that faraway land. There was progress in learning the language and communicating with the Indians. Lessons were learned as to the customs and religion of the Indians and were recorded for future endeavors. Most importantly, even though there were no recorded conversions, the men wrote with optimism regarding the power of the gospel of grace to penetrate the hearts and change the lives of the Indian cannibals. The reason for failure was not a lack of hard work and effort as much as, in God's good providence, a lack of time to labor.

We can rest assured that the work was not a failure, even though its value may not be revealed until we get to heaven. The Reformation Church sounded the word of God not only throughout Europe, but all the way to Brazil. The word accomplished its purpose. John Calvin and the church in Geneva faithfully took advantage of the open door God had given to the New World. Sacrifices were made for the sake of the gospel. And the work that God started through John Calvin would be continued by his spiritual sons in God's good time.