

# The relevance of the mission strategy and theology of John Calvin for Africa today<sup>1</sup>

*Dr. P.J. (Flip) Buys*

*Associate Professor*

*Research Unit of the Faculty of Theology*

*North-West University*

*POTCHEFSTROOM*

*Associate International Director world Reformed Fellowship*

*buys.flip@gmail.com*

*It ought to be the great object of our daily wishes, that God would collect churches for Himself from all the countries of the earth, that He would enlarge their numbers, enrich them with gifts, and establish a legitimate order among them (Calvin 1997:3,20.42).<sup>2</sup>*

## **Abstract**

*For many years severe criticism has been published against the Reformers for their lack of interest in missions. It was argued that John Calvin followed the Catholic, colonial model of Christian rulers as being responsible for converting the heathen. Several scholars expressed the idea that Calvin's doctrine of Predestination re-vented itself in his theology of missions or lack of it.*

---

1 Adapted from a paper read at a 500 year commemoration of the heritage of John Calvin at an international symposium in Djakarta, Indonesia in 2009.

2 In this article references to Calvin's Institutes will be taken from the translation of Henry Beveridge, Esq, Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, and references will be to the chapters and paragraphs referred to.

*More recent research has pointed out that this is a misrepresentation of Calvin's theology. To exegete Calvin properly, one must take the historical facts and context into account in order to present a fair reading and understanding of Calvin's views, that gives proper weight to his historical context. If we study the new research on the historical facts of his mission strategies and then consider again some key aspects of the theology of Calvin, we find several aspects that prove the missions thrust in his whole theology.*

*When the whole picture of Calvin's theology and strategies of doing missions is taken into serious consideration it becomes clear that there are indeed many aspects that are highly relevant for the struggle of the churches and the people groups of Africa in modern times.*

## **1. Background**

During the last century it has not been unusual for historians, especially Anglo-Saxon historians, to direct severe criticism against the Reformers for their lack of interest in missions. Charles Chaney (1970:13) points out how Luther and Calvin have been castigated by friend and foe alike as men with a "missionary vacuum", as men who raised "no lament" over the practical impossibility of the churches of the Reformation "discharging the missionary obligation" to the people of the newly discovered lands of the world.

We can take as an example the North American historian, William R. Hogg who is of the opinion that [the] non-Roman branch of Western Christianity developed its missionary spirit slowly. He states: "The Protestant reformers, among them Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin, disavowed any obligation for Christians to carry the gospel beyond their fellow-countrymen" (Hogg,1952:1,2). Hogg was of the opinion that in the writings of Calvin there is no positive recognition of a theology of missions.

Durant (1957:490) could even say: "But we shall always find it hard to love the man [Calvin] who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense."

Kenneth Scott Latourette (1939:25), says that the “early leaders of Protestantism disavowed any obligation to carry the Christian message to non-Christians”.

It seems that hyper-Calvinists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (deviating from Calvin) believed there was no theological basis for missions. This has led to some missiologists to express the view that missionary activity, since it involved human initiative, was an affront to the sovereign predestination of God as believed by Calvinists (Mulholland, 1999:86).

Behind an anti-missions movement in South Africa was also a reasoning, influenced by the theology of the (hyper Calvinist) Drendt, trend among the Secession churches (Afscheiding) in the Netherlands. According to the reasoning of this theological trend certain signs of God’s *preparational grace* must first be seen in the lives of people as an indication of God’s elective grace before a well meant offer of the gospel may be presented to them.

In South Africa some opponents to a well meant offer of the Gospel and missional outreach to black people claimed that they were Calvinists and based their views on the theology of the well-known post-Reformation theologian À Brakel, especially views like the following:

We maintain that this call does not come to all men. Although it does come to entire areas, nations, peoples, and languages, it does not come to all (à Brakel, 1996, ca.1992).

After Christ’s coming, this calling has also not been universal. The entire continent of America was unknown and remained unknown for at least a thousand years and was thus deprived of the gospel. The interior is still largely unknown. There have always been countries where the gospel has not been proclaimed. Also today, most nations upon the face of the earth are deprived of the gospel. This fact is so obvious that it cannot be refuted, and it thus remains a certainty that this calling is not universal (à Brakel, 1996, ca.1992).

One of the best explanations of the opposing trends in the Netherlands within the secession churches after 1834 is given in the book

of Veenhof (1959:45-57 & 88-131). He deals extensively with the clashes between the “Gelderse” section – who referred to the writings of Calvin – and the “Drenchts” group who heavily opposed the notion that the promises of the Gospel, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people. Veenhof rightly points out how the same conflicts have surfaced in the USA and lead to the establishment of the Protestant Reformed Churches under Hoeksema.

In Missiology it was especially the missiologist Gustav Warneck (1901), who launched the criticism against Luther and Calvin for their perceived lack of a vision for missions. He has been seen as the father of the modern science of missions and was professor of missions at the University of Halle in Germany at the turn of the 19th century.

His now classic book (*History of Protestant Missions*) was the first attempt to write a history of missions within the Christian tradition.

It went through numerous German editions and revisions during a twenty-five year period. Throughout that time it saw several English translations. The eighth German edition became the basis for the definitive, third English edition in 1906. This study was not only widely circulated in his day, but has made an impact that is still felt in mission literature today.

However, already during the long and fruitful life of Warneck, his colleagues in Germany refuted his viewpoints on the Reformers and missions.

Warneck’s judgment that Calvin did not recognize the church’s missionary obligation was based solely on Calvin’s view of the apostolate, and on one quote to the effect that God alone will advance the kingdom of Christ. On this slim evidence Warneck concludes that for Calvin a special institution for the extension of Christianity among non-Christian nations, i.e. for missions was needless because Calvin followed the Catholic, colonial model of Christian rulers as being responsible for converting the heathen. Warneck argued that this conception permeated both Lutheran and

Reformed orthodoxy until the rise of Pietism, that was according to him, the real spirit behind modern Protestant missions, in the late seventeenth century.

In the debates, several scholars expressed the idea that Calvin's doctrine of Predestination revenged itself in his theology of missions or lack of it.

It is not uncommon to find such scholars deducing from doctrines like predestination, quite apart from evidence in the sources, a fatalistic anti-missions bias in Calvin.

They argued that, if we believe that everything is predestined by God, all motivation for mission has been removed. Our efforts will avail nothing if God does not see to it that people are converted, and if, on the other hand, He decides to save them, our involvement or efforts are hardly likely to make any difference.

## **2. Problem statement**

More recent research has pointed out that this is a misrepresentation of Calvin's theology. Neither Calvin nor Luther taught that God's sovereign control eliminates our responsibility. It is true that Calvin did not develop a complete theology of mission but it is clear that his whole theology had a missional thrust.

T.L. Wenger, (2007:310-328) rightly pointed out that the 19th-century historiographic method of dividing central dogmas in eras when no such preoccupation drove theological construction must be avoided by anyone who desires to paint a fair portrait of Calvin. To exegete Calvin properly, one must take these issues into account in order to present a fair reading that gives proper weight to his historical context.

If we study the new research on the historical facts of his mission strategies and then consider again the theology of Calvin, we find several aspects that prove the missions thrust in his whole theology.

Partially in response to Warneck and his followers, a number of scholars have found in Calvin both a theoretical and a practical exponent of missions. During the past 4 decades several excellent

articles have argued that various aspects of Calvin's doctrines not only imply missions, but that the reformer actually demonstrated an ardent longing for the conversion of non-Christians. Samuel Zwemer (1950:206-216,) a well-known Reformed missionary to Arabia, points to Karlfried Frohlich's 1930 study of Calvin's theological articulation of the cosmic struggle between Christ and Satan as basic to the Genevan's missionary consciousness. Zwemer himself contends that Calvin's doctrines of God's creation of man in his image, with a sense of divinity and of common grace, are fundamental for his understanding of the heathen.

Haykin (2001:34) can even say that the perspective that it is axiomatic that the Reformers had no concern for overseas missions to non-Christians and that they evidence no recognition at all of the missionary dimension of the church is far from the truth.

James de Jong (1975) who made an extensive study of John Calvin in Mission Literature, came to the conclusion that the mission literature on John Calvin, is large and significant enough to warrant wider recognition by Calvin scholars. It struggles with an elusive dimension of the reformer's thought and life. But both those who minimize and those who exaggerate his missionary significance have contributed to a balanced evaluation of his views on mission.

How could the missional thrust in Calvin's theology really be discovered and appreciated and its relevance for the developing world indicated? It is my conviction that only if one consider the historical facts of Calvin's involvement in spreading the Gospel far and wide and the many ways he spurred students and his contemporaries on to real missionary action, it provides the spectacles through which the blossoming missions theology in his writings can be discovered.

This progression, from action to belief, suggests the first part of this paper's two major divisions. The first section concerns some astounding facts of Calvin's practice of missions and the second will then point out the key theological foundations of Calvin's theology of missions.

It seems that there is an emerging interest in Calvinistic Reformed Theology in post-colonial Africa and post-apartheid South Africa.

In a blog on a webpage of a church in Zambia Pastor Conrad Mbewe wrote on 1 August 2013:

A significant number of people across Africa, who are largely young professionals in their twenties and thirties, have recently embraced the Reformed Faith ...

The testimony of these young men and women has been universally the same. They have listened to Reformed sermons and felt like men and women who have starved for years and stumbled into a room with food meant for a king ...

Whereas previously the Reformed Faith in this robust form was almost a monopoly of the “white” South Africans and “blacks” shunned the R-word because of its associations with Apartheid, yet these “black” young adults now love the R-word and are changing the demographics altogether (Mbewe, 2013).

He concludes by writing:

Whereas the Reformed movement in Zambia is growing by leaps and bounds, it looked as if it was an oasis in the midst of a continent-wide desert (but for a fountain here and there).

Yet, this is not the time to quit. The work has only begun. It is a Macedonian call, summoning us to send out missionaries who will plant churches where these young men and women are and disciple them as they marry, raise families, and take up places of responsibility in their communities. Many of them have no idea what a proper functioning local church really looks like (ibid.).

It seems that a new consideration of John Calvin’s theology and methodology of missions might find open doors in post colonial Africa and post-apartheid South Africa.

Therefore the third section of this paper endeavors to provide a few pointers of contemporary application of Calvin’s viewpoints in Africa. In my own study of the theology and mission strategy of Calvin I became more and more convinced that the key aspects of his theology and strategy of missions are more relevant than ever to address the needs of Africa (and perhaps other places in the developing world) in the next millennium.

### **3. Some historical facts of Calvin's work at Geneva and his vision for missions that may be derived from it**

The problems with which Calvin had to grapple over the closing months of his life touched many lands, but the challenges of one specific country took particular prominence for him, as they had done for many years. This was France, his own homeland. Right up until the end, Calvin kept receiving information about, and commenting upon, political happenings there. To the end, his advice was sought by, and given to the Protestants of France on how to cope with a situation which, in church and state, was becoming increasingly intolerant to them. These concerns of a dying man prompt questions about how they became part of his life and why they weighed so heavily on his mind even in the face of his own death.

Already the 1536 version of his Institutes alerts us to the fact that Calvin's work, even at this early stage of his life, was already deeply enmeshed with the spiritual welfare of his own countrymen.

### **4. Calvin's City and its contribution to mission**

During the years of Calvin's settled ministry in Geneva (1541-1564), the Reformation was struggling for its very existence throughout the lands of Europe. There was compelling need for providing, and maintaining, properly trained workers to carry on the task of spreading the gospel in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, the British Isles and other countries within reach.

Those needs were constantly being brought home to Calvin. From the early 1540s onward, Geneva became a city of refuge for the persecuted Protestants of other lands, and they flocked into it. It is calculated that at some periods during the 1540s and 50s, the population (estimated at between 10,000 and 15,000) probably doubled. Naturally enough, Calvin, himself a refugee from religious persecution, was tenderly sympathetic to people driven from their homelands because of their religious beliefs. And of course, in various ways Geneva benefited from their presence. Says Reid (1983:70): "Coming from very different countries and covering a



wide social spectrum, they brought much new life and activity to Geneva.”

Amongst those who fled and found a safe haven in Geneva were crowds of Calvin’s own countrymen. He was thus always deeply aware of the religious and political situation in France and constant dealings with Christians from there must have whetted his concern and maintained his aspiration for the nation’s religious reform at a consistently high pitch.

Calvin, however, saw his city as far more than a haven for refugees. He realized the enormous potential of the situation for preparing and sending out preachers and evangelists to the needy lands around him – lands which he regarded, from the spiritual aspect, as being “fields white unto harvest”. Commenting on this P.E. Hughes (1973:44), writes:

Calvin’s Geneva was something very much more than a haven and a school. It was not a theological ivory tower that lived to itself and for itself, oblivious to its responsibility in the gospel to the needs of others. Human vessels were equipped and refitted in this haven ... that they might launch out into the surrounding ocean of the world’s need, bravely facing every storm and peril that awaited them in order to bring the light of Christ’s gospel to those who were in the ignorance and darkness from which they themselves had originally come. They were taught in this school in order that they in turn might teach others the truth that had set them free.

That Calvin was fully aware of the doors of opportunity opened in this way, we can have no doubt. In a letter to Henry Bullinger, for example, he explicitly links Geneva and evangelistic mission when he writes:

... when I consider how very important this corner is for the propagation of the kingdom of Christ, I have good reason to be anxious that it should be carefully watched over ... (as quoted by Hughes, 1973:44).

This passionate concern that the gospel should reach out to the world from Geneva is reflected in a sermon on 1 Timothy 3:4:

May we attend to what God has enjoined upon us, that he would be pleased to show his grace, not only to one city or a little handful of people, but that He would reign over all the world; that everyone may serve and worship Him in truth (Calvin, 1983:161-172).

Geneva was, geographically, superbly situated to be a training centre equipping evangelists for the Reformed Church in France. It was only through Geneva that Protestants could find a reasonably safe entrance into that country, ringed around as it was by Spain, Savoy, Lorraine and the Spanish Netherlands, all firmly under the control of strongly reactionary Romanist leaders.

Politically Geneva had a powerful military ally, the Republic of Berne, warding off fears of military intervention in its affairs. Within this city, Calvin could set to work unhampered by too much outside interference; from it he could keep in touch with the rest of Europe.

France was ripe for the gospel at the time of Calvin. Consequently Calvin and his co-ministers at Geneva started selecting men and training them as missionaries, after which they were sent out to other countries. Hundreds of men were sent out, reaching Italy, Germany, Scotland, England, and practically covering France. The majority were sent to France. The late Prof. D. MacMillan (1989:5-17), a Church Historian of Edinburgh in Scotland, estimated that as many as 1200 of those missionaries were sent out from Geneva to France! These missionaries, who had been taught the gospel in all its power and beauty from the mouth of Calvin himself, after completing their studies, were sent by secret tracks across the Alps to France, where they went to work as farm labourers, school teachers and other occupations as “tent making missionaries”, in order to evangelize their fellow labourers. On Sundays, services were held in sheds or standing on haystacks. Preachers often had to hide in secret places behind chimneys in order to avoid capture and execution. The resistance movement in the Second World War gratefully used these same secret tracks and hiding places! Many of those missionaries sent out from the “Theological School” in Geneva were indeed captured and martyred to death.

There are not many, if indeed any at all, seminaries which send out more than a thousand missionaries in a few years, even in these modern days of easy communication and affluence. One may conclude that Calvin's seminary at Geneva was a missionary training institution par excellence!

Most of the factual information about the men trained and sent out, and especially about those trained for the work in France, comes to us from records which are available for only part of the period between 1541 and 1564. R.M. Kingdon (1970:31) whose work with these records has opened up this whole field of investigation, says:

In April 1555 the official Registers of the Company (of Pastors) for the first time listed missionaries formally dispatched.

Obviously, records prior to this time were not retained for reasons of security. On this question of extant records P. E. Hughes (1973:46) reminds us:

They were restricted, in the main, to the few years between 1555 and 1562 when it was felt that the names of those who were sent out from Geneva as missionaries might be recorded (though not advertised) with some degree of safety.

Despite fierce persecution there was great blessing on the labours of these "tentmaking missionaries".

The source of Protestant power in France, shown by the sudden appearance of organised Huguenot armies in 1560, has always been difficult for historians to explain. The entire movement is expressive of careful organisation and meticulous central planning. It now emerges that a well-instructed people had by then been integrated into a structured church life which, like a spider's web, reached out into all the provinces and yet had sufficient central coherence for problems to be discussed, plans to be formulated and, if necessary, unified defensive strategies employed.

#### ***4.1 Significant church planting***

There is now, also, a growing awareness that the emergence of this powerfully motivated church has to be traced back to the training at

Geneva of a very effective missionary force. And supporting it was the line of direct communication back into Geneva, and the men there who had moulded its beliefs and directed its energies. The missionary thrust inherent in their theology, and the spiritual vision for the salvation of others which it generated, ensured that Calvin – and his ministerial colleagues in Geneva – recognized, in the mountain pathways into France, doors of opportunity for spreading the gospel. The story of how they went through them is, in the words of Professor David B. Calhoun (1979:16-33), “a thrilling chapter in the history of missions”.

In 1545, there were five Reformed churches in France. In 1559, there were almost 100. In 1562, the number had reached 2 150. The total membership of these churches in 1562 is estimated at three million (out of a total population in France of about 20 million). By 1562 Catharina de Medici, the Roman Catholic queen of France, had to learn to her dismay that there were already 2150 Huguenot churches in France, with an estimated membership of two million — a sizable portion of the whole population of France at that time!

Some of the French Reformed congregations became very large. For example, Pierre Viret pastored a church of 8 000 communicants in Nimes. More than 10 percent of the French population – as many as three million – belonged to these churches in the 1560s.

During the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of 1572, 70 000 Protestants were killed. Nevertheless, the church continued. Eventually, persecution drove out many of the French Protestants, known as the Huguenots. They left France for many different nations, enriching the church wherever they went.

Not all of the refugee pastors were sent to French churches. Some went to Northern Italy, others to Antwerp, London, and other cities in Europe. Some even went beyond Europe to far-off Brazil. Regardless of where they went, their preaching was strong and powerful, and God blessed their efforts.

## ***4.2 Missional theological education***

We know that a very solid program of education was laid out for these men studying in Geneva. One of the catalysts of the Refor-

mation had been scholarly study of the Scriptures and so every man training for this ministry was expected to be well equipped for the lifelong task of biblical exegesis and exposition. Calvin as the maestro himself epitomised the ideal as in his daily lectures and expositions as he spoke extemporaneously and directly from the Hebrew or Greek text of the Scripture. He believed the Gospel is “brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it”. (Calvin, 1950ff: Commentary Romans 10:15) and therefore the bearers of the Gospel had to be well equipped.

The training took anything from three to eight years, depending on the academic abilities and spiritual qualities of the students. Calvin stated that God, if he wanted to, is able to sanctify people perfectly in one moment, but that it was his good pleasure to use human ministers for that purpose. These ministers of the Word are God’s “hands”, and it is their task to build up the churches in faith by the faithful ministry of the Word.

Much more could be said on this fascinating subject, but even our brief, outline study illustrates the urgent need to reassess and reinterpret the traditional notions entertained about it. The more recent collations, and interpretations, of the relevant data available to us about Calvin, Geneva and Mission combine to show that Calvin was the person, and Geneva the place, to which one of the finest churches of the Reformation era owed, under God, its life and witness (cf. also several articles in the publication of Schirrmacher, 2009). It was a church which was to stand strong for Christ for more than one hundred years of struggle and persecution in its own homeland and which, even after its final dispersal in the latter part of the seventeenth century, took its godly witness and its theological heritage out from France to England, Ireland, the Netherlands, America and South Africa.

## **5. Calvin’s involvement in missions besides France**

Calvin was concerned for not only France, but also for the reformation of the church in places like Scotland and England, Spain, as well as Poland, Hungary, and the Netherlands. He even en-

couraged a mission to Brazil in 1555, which turned out, though, to be a failure.

### **5.1 Calvin's heart for an influence on the Waldensians**

Calvin also showed that he was more than a detached scholar fighting the war for reformation from an ivory tower in Geneva. He was active and involved in the practical affairs of the whole church. He demonstrated a tender heart for those Christians who shared his love for the Scriptures and the gospel. His zealous defense of the Waldensians during the time of their intense persecution opened the door for him to have a great impact on the doctrine and life of the Waldensian church.

We see the emotional side of Calvin when he writes to Farel about the persecution of the Waldensian Christians: "I write, worn out with sadness, and not without tears, which so burst forth, that every now and then they interrupt my words" (Calvin, 1858:435).

Calvin and the Genevan Academy exerted a tremendous influence on the Waldensian church through the training of Waldensians. An early contingent of Waldensian students who completed their training and received approbation from the "Venerable Company of Pastors" was sent to Calabria, to the Valleys and to Piedmont. By zealously defending the Waldensian church, Calvin and the Swiss Reformers actually won the right to train its pastors! (Accardy, 2001:52).

As these pastors went out from Geneva they took with them Bibles and the writings of John Calvin.

Calvin also provided the Italian Mission with several teachers and colporteurs who contributed to the diffusion of the Bible and the works of Calvin namely, his Catechism, the Christian Institutes, and his Commentary on the Holy Scriptures which with the Confession were soon divulged and became the practice of the Waldensian church (Accardy, 2001:54).

Much is made of the movement of the Reformed faith northward into the Netherlands and Scotland. However, it is also true, that the

Reformed faith was carried by the Waldensians southward into southern France and northern Italy. We find that by the late 1550's Calvin's influence was being codified in the official doctrinal standards of the Waldensian church (Accardy, 2001:43-57).

## **5.2 Brazil**

In 1556, Calvin supported admiral Coligny to get a party of colonists together to establish a settlement and Protestant refuge in Brazil. Included in the group were several ministers. One of the purposes of the colony and duties of the ministers was "to indoctrinate the savage and to bring them to the knowledge of their salvation". This door soon closed with failure and martyrdom cause by the betrayal of Villegagnon who became disenchanted with Calvin and the Reformers. On February 9, 1558, just outside of Rio de Janeiro, he strangled three Calvinists and threw them into the sea. Believers fled for their lives. Later, the Portuguese attacked and destroyed the remainder of the settlement (Gordon, 1984:12-18).

## **6. Some key mission principles in the theology of Calvin**

What were some of the basic missiological assumptions in the theology of Calvin? How did the convictions he taught compelled believers to seek the conversion of all people, both within the church as well as outside it?

If we think of mission as something that happens only in faraway countries across the ocean, it is indeed true that Calvin and most of his contemporaries did not show so much concern for those countries. However, there were good reasons for this. People in those days hardly knew anything about the interior of Africa and the Americas with their vast unreached populations. Australia had not even been discovered by European seafarers.

Several decades after Calvin's death, many doors began to open. Staunch Calvinists became some of the first to respond to these opportunities. The understanding that, in God's plan, the time had come for these nations to hear the gospel took on great significance.

## **6.1 Trinitarian understanding of the *Missio Dei***

A key principle in this regard was Calvin's conviction of the universality of Christ's kingdom and the responsibility of Christians to be part of the extension of his reign.

The universality of Christ's kingdom is a theme that often occurs in Calvin's writings (cf. Calvin, J. 1950ff: Commentary on Psalm 2:8; 110:2; Matthew 6:10; 12:31; John 13:31; 8; Micah 4:3).

Calvin had a true Trinitarian understanding of the *missio Dei*. He taught that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the extension of the kingdom of God: The Father will show "not only in one corner, what true religion is ... but he will send forth his voice to the extreme limits of the earth" (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Micah 4:3). Jesus came "to extend his grace over all the world" (Calvin 1983b:161-172). The Holy Spirit descended to "reach all the ends and extremities of the world" (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Acts 2:1-4). In short, Calvin firmly believed that an innumerable offspring "who shall be spread over the whole earth" will be born to Christ (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Psalm 110:3).

## **6.2 God's sovereignty and man's responsibility not in conflict**

Calvin taught clearly that the extension of God's kingdom in the world involves both God's sovereignty and our responsibility.

On the one hand he often stresses that the work of evangelism is God's work, not ours, but then strongly stresses that God uses us as His instruments.

With reference to the parable of the sower, Calvin explains that Christ sows the seed of life everywhere (Matt. 13:24-30), gathering His church not primarily by human means but by heavenly power (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Isaiah 2:3). But the gospel "does not fall from the clouds like rain", however; rather, it is "brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it" (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Romans 10:14-17. 17; Psalm 2:8). Jesus teaches us that God "uses our work and summons us to be his instruments



in cultivating his field” (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Matthew 13:24-30). The power to save rests with God, but He reveals His salvation through the preaching of the gospel (Calvin, 1997:Institutes, 4:1,5). God’s evangelism causes our evangelism (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Romans 10:14-17). We are His co-workers, and He allows us to participate in “the honor of constituting his own Son as Ruler over the whole world” (Calvin, J. 1950ff.: Commentary on Psalm 2:8).

### **6.3 God uses his people with all their gifts**

Calvin taught that the ordinary method of “collecting a church” is by the outward voice of men, “for though God might bring each person to himself by a secret influence, yet he employs the agency of men, that he may awaken in them an anxiety about the salvation of each other” (Calvin, J. 1950ff: Commentary on Isaiah 2:3). He goes so far as to say, “Nothing retards so much the progress of Christ’s kingdom as the paucity of ministers” (Calvin, 1858: 4:263). Still, no human effort has the final word. It is the Lord, says Calvin, who “causes the voice of the gospel to resound not only in one place, but far and wide through the whole world” (Calvin, 1950ff: Commentary on Isaiah 49:2).

For Calvin, missions and evangelism is actually the Holy Spirit working through God’s people who have received a variety of gifts to serve others in order to draw them closer to Christ. With reference to Joel 2:28 he says: “For although the prophet seems to confine the gifts of the Spirit to the office of prophesying, he yet intimates under a figure, that God will, by the illumination of his Spirit, provide himself with disciples who had previously been altogether ignorant of heavenly doctrine” (Calvin, 1997: Institutes (III, i, 2).

All other gifts, however excellent they may be in themselves, are of no value unless they are subservient to charity. They were given for the edification of the Church, and fail of their purpose if not so applied ( Ibid (III, ii, 9).

Calvin emphasizes with reference to the “the communion of the Holy Ghost”, that no man shall ever taste the paternal favor of God,

or the benefits of Christ without the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore we constantly need to pray with the apostle Paul in Romans 5:5 that “The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto us” (Ibid (III, i, 2).

#### **6.4 *The calling of the gentiles***

The foundation of Calvin’s missionary ideas was the calling of the gentiles. In Calvin’s thought, with the calling of Abraham God began to restrict himself to one people, the Jews. However, through the prophets, He announced that the day would come in which He would extend his mercy and grace to all the peoples of the world. God’s reign over Israel through the Kingdom of David was but a potent of that greater Kingdom which was to come. In Calvin’s exposition of Isaiah 2:4, he explained the calling of the Gentiles in these terms:

Since ... God had not taken more than one nation to be the subject of his reign, the Prophet here shows that the boundaries of his Kingdom will be enlarged, that he may rule over the, various nations ...

At that time God ruled over his own people by the hand of David, but after the coming of Christ, he began to reign .... in the person of his only-begotten Son. ... He confirms the calling of the Gentiles, because Christ is not sent to the Jews only, that he may reign over them, but that he may hold his sway over the whole earth ...

#### **6.5 *A holistic kingdom perspective on missions***

A very important missions principle in Calvin’s thought was the progressive extension of the Kingdom throughout the world. Calvin often used the metaphor of the royal sceptre to express this concept. “Christ’s Kingdom shall be vastly extended, because God would make his sceptre stretch far and wide” (Calvin, J. 1950ff: Commentary Ps 110).

Calvin taught that the apostles only began to fulfill the church’s call to spread the gospel (Ibid. Commentary Ps 110). He taught that every minister should be willing “to go a distance, to spread the

doctrine of salvation in every part of the world” (Ibid. Commentary on Matthew 24:19; Isaiah 12:5; Matthew 24:14; 2 Corinthians 2:12). Indeed, “every Christian should testify of God’s grace by word and deed to those he or she meets (Calvin, J. 1997: Institutes, 4.20.4).

Calvin’s view of the Kingdom was one of certain conquest. He said: “Though the Kingdom of Christ is in such a condition that it appears as if it were about to perish at every moment, yet God not only protects and defends it, but also extends its boundaries far and wide, and then preserves and carries it forward in uninterrupted progress to eternity” (Calvin, J. 1950ff: Commentary Is 9:7).

With the coming of Christ, his Kingdom was only begun in the world (Calvin, J. 1950ff: Commentary Micah 4:3). Yet it ought to be observed, that while the fullness of days began at the coming of Christ, it flows on in uninterrupted progress until he appears the second time for our salvation (Ibid Commentary Isaiah 2:2).

## **6.6 *Missio Dei and the glory of God***

Among the principle motives for carrying out the mission and proclaiming the Gospel everywhere is the glory that should be offered to God. Paul declares the glory of the grace of our God four times in Eph. 1:1-14, and in his commentary on that passage Calvin emphasizes the fundamental importance of this concept. He distinguishes four aspects of our salvation:

- The efficient cause is the good pleasure of the will of God.
- The material cause of election and of the love of God is the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
- The final cause is the praise of the glory of his grace.
- The formal cause is the preaching of the Gospel.

“The glory of God is the highest goal of our sanctification. The frequent mention of the glory of God ought not to be regarded as superfluous, for what is infinite cannot be too strongly expressed” (Calvin, J. 1950ff: Commentary on Eph. 1:11;1:14)

The issue of the glory of God also motivated Calvin's theocratic ideal which provided a very strong motivation for mission. In his exegesis of the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Let your kingdom come", he said that this means that all mortals must be brought under God's rule, that all obstacles have to be removed, and the Word preached to all people.

## **6.7 Election**

A very important motivation (NB not a hindrance!) for missions for Calvin was the teaching about election. He wrote in his commentary on 1 Peter 3:9 that God wants all men to be converted. We do not know who the elect are, therefore we have to bring the gospel to everyone. We have the comfort and encouragement that, when we bring the gospel to the elect, **God's grace is irresistible**. We should never think that Calvin was a hyper-calvinist! He believed – and practiced the system that ministers should insist on repentance and conversion of their audience.

It is a pity that many Reformed churches in later times lost this zeal for the salvation of lost people.

## **7. Relevance of key aspects of the missions theology and methodology of Calvin for contemporary Africa**

In considering the challenges of contemporary Africa it is necessary to take note of how African authors, observe the realities of the African context.

In this regard Professor George Kinoti states:

Among the nations of the world, Africa has become synonymous with poverty, political chaos, social disorder and general backwardness. But I believe that we can overcome our problems and bring peace, prosperity, justice and dignity to this continent. To do so we first need to understand the severity and the causes of the crises facing the African people. Then we need to catch the vision for a better Africa and act to bring about its material, social, moral and spiritual well-being (Kinoti and Kimuyu 1997:1).

Along the same line Professor Yusufu Turaki states:

In spite of the fact that Africans are indeed a religious people and have even embraced universal religions, such as, Christianity, Islam, and western modernity in addition to their own traditional religions and cultural values, yet the “visions of man and freedom” as contained in these traditions have left man mostly in chains in Africa. The vision of humanity and its potentials for good, human fulfillment and human freedom are cherished values which seem to have eluded Africa for centuries. Arab and European slave-raiding and slave-trade and their subsequent colonization of Africa and the inter-tribal and racial wars are historical testimonies of human sufferings in Africa. New forms of human suffering, degradation and dehumanization have engulfed modern Africa. We see these in many socio-political and economic problems, corrupt and inept leadership and devastating ethnic, racial and tribal tensions, violence and conflicts (Turaki, 1997:2).

Among the various problems of Africa Turaki list the following that are of particular interest for this paper:

Politics was introduced, but it became the factory of manufacturing ethnocentrism, violence, crises and conflicts. Cultural and social life became rudderless and confusing.

- Problems of civil wars and wars of ethnic genocide
- Problems of refugees and lack of peaceful co-existence
- Despotic dictatorship
- Leadership-followership cum ethnicity/tribalism
- Ethnic nationalities

Rampant ethnocentrism in Africa according to him is the vicious and cancerous virus that eats up and destroys national moral character and virtues. Ethnocentrism is the excessive love of one’s own ethnic, racial, cultural, or religious group to sometimes hatred or exclusion of others. It breeds exclusivity, parochialism, proclivity, tribalism, racism, or regionalism/sectionalism. It dominates, subordinates, or excludes others. Turaki is of the opinion that all of these problems and challenges are the results of a lack of a good vision of society and a good transformational-education.

In conjunction with this he also addressed the issue of Pluralism in Africa.

As a result of a lack of holistic Christian missions in Africa a value system steeped in the old habits of Traditional African Religion – fetishism, ancestor worship, idolatry, etc. is still prevailing in many ways in Christian communities. Personal, tribal and national crises reveal this in the reversion to the old ways. Efforts of “contextualizing” of the Christian message in such a way to fit into the frame of reference of the African traditional religion and worldview is perhaps one of the major factors that gives rise to the African face of religious pluralism. The question why Christianity and the message of the Gospel have had so little influence to prevent the terrible destructive events in Africa which have so impacted many nations in recent years cannot be understood without understanding syncretism and religious pluralism.

The most important theological issue in the concept of salvation in African Theology is that of the equality of all religions. The theological premise in this area is the acceptance of universal grace without Jesus Christ or alongside Jesus Christ. Some African theologians and scholars assert that salvation is not the exclusive reserve for Christianity only, but there is the possibility of finding salvation outside of the church and Jesus Christ and, in this case, in the traditional religions. The theology of African intermediaries asserts that God had mediators between Him and the Africans, thus affirming the plurality and parity of salvation. The unique Christ for salvation as claimed by Calvin seems to make no sense to them. This “universal grace” is located within the traditional religions.

The prominence of intermediaries also stems from the fact that God ‘cannot be approached directly’ (Mtuzze, 2003:26). The custom of approaching a chief or king through intermediaries is common in Africa (Parratt, 1987:71; Mtuzze, 2003:26), and seems to be one of the explanations for the belief that God can only be approached through intermediaries (spirits, but especially the ancestors) (Mbiti 1969:68; Mtuzze, 2003:45). The ancestors’ intermediary role is also deduced from the fact that they understand their living relatives’

needs and are closer to God and have full access to him (Gehman, 1989:141; Mbiti, 1969:83). Put a little differently, the ancestors 'occupy the ontological position between ... God and men [sic]' and 'speak a bilingual language' – the language of the living and God (Mbiti, 1969:69).

Turaki (1999:28) points out convincingly that the emphasis of African Theology on the theology of creation was not equally balanced by emphasis on the Biblical theology of the fall, sin and redemption. He then raises some crucial theological questions: "Do Africans in their traditional religions derive their knowledge of God from his personality? What is the content of this knowledge of God? In what ways do Africans respond to this knowledge of God?"

Gehman (1989:268 vv) also points out that continuity, between Christian faith and African Traditional Religion as being advocated by liberal theologians has its roots in a low view of Scripture and a high opinion of man's moral character. A Biblical continuity-discontinuity seeks to maintain that false religion is the result of Man's fall away from God. Christianity is thus not a fulfilment of ATR. There must be discontinuity because of man's sinful rebellion against God. There must, however, be some measure of continuity because of general revelation given to all men through nature and conscience.

In this regard Calvin's teaching of a *sensus divinitatis* – which is the phrase John Calvin fixed in the theological lexicon – may be helpful to develop a model of valid contextualization that would on the one hand *connect* and at the same time *confront* the idols of Africa. According to Calvin the *sensus divinitatis* is an immediate, intuitive sense we all have of God: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity" (*divinitatis sensum*) (Calvin, 1997: Institutes, 1.43.). This means that there is "no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they do not have a deep seated conviction that there is a God" (Ibid. 1.45.). The proof? All human cultures have had a religion, and even idolatry is proof of the point. This means that for Calvin the world's religions are not the evil inventions of the devil but the natural result of the *sensus divinitatis* (Ibid. 1.47).

This by no means leads one to the judgment that all religions are the same, however. Even though God has sown the seed of religion in all human beings, “scarcely one man in a hundred is met who fosters it ... and none in whom it ripens”( Ibid. 1.47). The *sensus divinitatis* does not lead to salvation. Our superstitions and our malaise – in short, our sin – prevent us from taking full advantage of this intuitive knowledge.

### ***7.1 Millions of refugees in Africa as a door for the Gospel***

As a result of the ethnic clashes, tribalism, civil wars and wars of ethnic genocide, refugees and lack of peaceful co-existence, millions of refugees are being displaced.

The global number of refugees under UNHCR’s mandate was estimated at 10.5 million at the end of 2012. Outflows of more than 1.1 million refugees, mainly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Somalia, Sudan, and the Syrian Arab Republic stretched emergency response systems globally for the third year in a row (United Nations High Commissioner for refugees, 2012).

On the other hand there are also statistics of refugees that are returning to their countries of origin.

From a *missio Dei* perspective, we should ask the question: What is the will of God for the church in this regard? For instance, some of the refugees are coming from countries that are closed for the Gospel or where it is extremely difficult for missionaries to enter the country.

Many of the non-Christian refugees from South Sudan came in contact with Christians in Ethiopia, Kenya and as far as South-Africa. Many of these refugees were praying and planning to go back as soon as possible to plant churches and train leaders. The amazing thing is that 85% of the population of South Sudan that has been driven from their homes by the war has in the mean time become Christians.

As refugees are returning, churches are being rebuilt and new churches are being planted. The Sudanese Reformed Churches,



for example, are busy planting more than 30 new churches in South Sudan and are busy establishing a variety of forms of theological education (Sudanese Reformed Churches, 2010:4,5). There are now more and more requests coming from South Sudan for assistance to re-establish Theological and Bible colleges to train pastors.

During the war between Frelimo and rebel forces in Mozambique there were very few Protestant churches in Northern Mozambique. During the war many refugees came in contact with Christians in Zimbabwe and Malawi and came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. After the war they returned to Mozambique and planted hundreds if not thousands of churches. The great challenge for the church now is to provide theological training for those churches.

## ***7.2 Holistic theological education***

In the light of the extreme poverty a relevant theological training in Africa should also prepare leaders to go into some form of “tent making” ministry in the same way Calvin sent missionaries over the Alps into France to go and work on farms and preach the gospel from haystacks or as school teachers. That implies that training to become bi-vocational church leaders should become part and parcel of the theological curricula and syllabi. It is pity that the system of tent making ministers, which was so richly blessed in Calvin’s time, has come to be discarded and even rejected by many Reformed Christians. Therefore part and parcel of mission strategies now, should be to train more local leaders by co-operation of reformed and evangelical in-service training methods.

## **8. Conclusions**

It is clear that John Calvin had a vision and passion for missions. It is also clear that his theology provided valid handles not only for doing mission in the times of the Reformation but that several of his points of departure may be valuable for missions in the contemporary Africa and through God’s grace may contribute to a better

understanding and appropriation of the transforming grace of the Triune God in the midst of many communities and countries bleeding from many wounds.

## Bibliography

- ACCARDY, C. 2001. Calvin's Ministry To The Waldensians. *Reformation and Revival Volume 10*. 2001(4):43-57. Carol Stream, IL: Reformation and Revival Ministries.
- BEEKE, J.R. 2001. John Calvin: Teacher and Practitioner of Evangelism. *Reformation & Revival*, 10(4) (Fall 2001):107-119.
- À BRAKEL, W. 1996 (ca.1992). *The Christian's reasonable service, Volumes 1 and 2 : In which Divine truths concerning the covenant of grace are expounded, defended against opposing parties, and their practice advocated as well as The administration of this covenant in the Old and New Testaments*. Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. (Electronic edn. of the first publication in the English language, based on the 3rd edn. of the original Dutch work.) (2:195). Morgan PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications.
- CALHOUN, D.B. 1979. John Calvin: Missionary Hero or Missionary Failure? *Presbyterion*, 5(1) (Spring): 16-33.
- CALVIN, J. 1858. *Letters of John Calvin*. Edited by Juled Bonnet. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication [Logos.com].
- CALVIN, J. 1950ff. *John Commentaries of Calvin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Software version on CD being used.
- CALVIN, J. 1983. *Sermons of M. John Calvin on the Epistles of St. Paul to Timothy and Titus*. Translated by L.T. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust.
- CALVIN, J. 1997. *Institutes of the Christian religion. A New Translation by Henry Beveridge*. Esq, Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.
- CHANEY, C. 1964. The Missionary Dynamic in the Theology of John Calvin. *Reformed Review*, 17(3) (March ):24-38.
- CHANEY, C. 1970. Martin Luther and the Mission of the Church. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 13(1): 13.
- DE JONG, JAMES. 1975. John Calvin in Mission Literature. *Pro Rege*, 4 (September):6-17.
- DE JONG, B. 1955. Calvin and the Mission of the Church in Geneva. *Missionary Monthly*, 99-D, February:9-11.
- DE JONG, B. 1955b. John Calvin's Missionary Genius. *Missionary Monthly* 99-D, March:8-10.
- DURANT, W. 1957. *The Reformation, vol. 6, The Story of Civilization*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

- GEHMAN, R.J. 1989. *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*. Kenya: Kijabe Printing Press.
- GORDON, A.G. 1984. The First Protestant Missionary Effort: Why Did It Fail? *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 8(1) (January): 12-18.
- HAYKIN, MICHAEL A. G. 2001. John Calvin's Missionary Influence in France. *Reformation and Revival*, 10 (4):34-43. Carol Stream, IL: Reformation and Revival Ministries.
- HOGG, WILLIAM R. 1952. *Ecumenical Foundation*. New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers.
- HUGHES, P. 1973. John Calvin: Director of Missions. In: *The Heritage of John Calvin*, Ed. John H. Bratt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- HOLSTEN, W. 1953. Reformation und Mission. *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte*, 44(1): 1-32;
- KINGDON, R.M. 1970. *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- KINOTI, G. & KIMUYU, P. 1997. *Vision for a Bright Africa: Facing Challenges of Development*. Nairobi: IFES and AISERD.
- LATOURETTE, K.S. 1939. Three Centuries of Advance: A.D. 1500-A.D. 1800, Vol. 3, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers.
- MacMILLAN, D.J. 1989. Calvin, Geneva, and Christian Mission. *Reformed Theological Journal*, 5 (Nov.).
- MBEWE, C. 2013. The Young, Restless, and Reformed ... In Africa. <http://www.conradmbewe.com/2013/08/the-young-restless-and-reformed-in-africa.html> (Accessed on 11 November 2014).
- MBITI, J. S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- MTUZE, P. T. 2003. *The Essence of Xhosa Spirituality and the Nuisance of Cultural Imperialism*. Florida Hills: Vivlia.
- MULHOLLAND, K.B. 1999. From Luther to Carey: Pietism and the Modern Missionary Movement. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 156(621): 84.
- McGRATH, A. E. 1990. *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture*. Oxford, United Kingdom/Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell. 121.
- REID, W. S. 1983. Calvin's Geneva: A Missionary Centre. *Reformed Theological Review*, 42(3):65-74.
- PARRATT, J. 1987. *A Reader in African Christian Theology*. London: SPCK.
- SCHIRRMACHER, T. (Ed.) 2009. *Calvin and World Mission*. Nürnberg: VTR Publications.
- SUDANESE REFORMED CHURCHES (SRC) General Synod. 2010. Five Year Strategic Plan 2011-2015.

- TURAKI, Y. 1997. Tribal Gods of Africa: Ethnicity, Racism, Tribalism and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jos, Nigeria.
- TURAKI, Y. 1999. Christianity and the African Gods. A method in Theology. *Scientific Contributions of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education*. Series F2 No. 75. Potchefstroom: IRS
- UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, 2012. UNHCR Global Trends 2012 Displacement. The New 21st Century Challenge. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c4d6.html> (Accessed on 11 November 2014).
- VAN DEN BERG, J. 1950. Calvin's Missionary Message, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 22:174-187.
- VEENHOF, C. 1959. *Prediking en uitverkiezing*. Kampen: Kok
- WARNECK, G, 1901. *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time*. Edinburgh New York: Fleming H. Revell Company.
- WENGER, T.L. 2007. The New Perspective on Calvin: Responding To Recent Calvin Interpretations. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 50(2):310-328. Lynchburg, VA: The Evangelical Theological Society.
- ZWEMER, S.M. 1950. Calvinism and the Missionary Enterprise. *Theology Today*, 7(2) July:206-216.