

# **Calvin on the Spirit Bearing Witness By and With the Word in Our Hearts**

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## **The Means of Grace and the Prodigal Son**

Jesus told the well-known parable of the prodigal son at Luke 15:11-32. This parable revolves around three characters—a gracious and compassionate father and his two very interesting and frankly not very attractive sons. We will only briefly focus on the father and the younger son, in order to open up the beauty of the means of grace.

The younger son, known in the parable as the prodigal, was raised and nurtured in the church under age. He lived among God’s people and learned to walk under Israel’s good laws. Contrary to his own culture then, or even our own culture now, this younger son demanded to receive the inheritance that was to be his own only after his father’s death. Such a demand was a blatant act of rebellion not only against his earthly father, but also against God and his laws.<sup>1</sup>

The younger son—now the prodigal—publicly announced that his earthly father, and all that his father stood for, was dead to him. He hated his father and his father’s God. Upon receiving his substantial inheritance he then fled from the means of grace offered in the land of Israel and sought the bodily comforts found in the filthy culture of wicked paganism.

In the parable, the prodigal son eventually awakens from his pagan slumbers and remembers life back in Israel. It is true that he hungered for earthly bread—but he also knew that he could find grace back home among God’s people. That memory of God’s kindness and mercy was, for him, a means of grace.

In a similar fashion the Word of God is a means of grace for us today. As each of us face temptations to sin, remembering God’s sweet promises found in his Word will stop our hearts and hands from moving forward in prodigal wickedness. The Word of God is indeed a great means of grace.

The main point of Jesus’ parable is not that the Bible is a means of grace, although it is, but rather God the Father’s great compassion on undeserving sinners. This is the important point that Calvin made in his exegesis of this passage.<sup>2</sup> Since many of those reading this article are ruling and teaching elders, I would like to draw out one application. Calvin underlined how wretched and undeserving the prodigal son was to receive God the Father’s unmerited and magnanimous love and mercy. The last 20 months of ministry have been a real struggle for many pastors and elders. Brothers, I want to remind you that God the Father is calling you to be like him when it comes to

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 2:343.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 2:342-349.

offering grace and specifically the means of grace. No matter how demanding and unworthy are the members of our congregation, we must keep offering them the word of God which is an oh-so-rich means of grace.

### **The Means of Grace and the Holy Spirit**

Let us now move from exegesis to an analysis of Calvin's *Institutes*—focusing on the work of the Holy Spirit. This great volume is divided into four books. The first concerns how men and women can obtain proper knowledge of our holy God who is the creator of the universe. Knowledge of God is intimately connected to knowledge of the self. Men and women cannot know themselves until they know that they are creatures created by a holy God. The second book is on the knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ. While those two books comprise the first 500 or so pages of the *Institutes*, there are another thousand pages in the third and fourth books. The third book is on the way in which believers receive Christ's grace—and the benefits that flow from it.

#### *Calvin on the Holy Spirit and Union with Christ*

The first theme we will address is that of union with Christ by the Holy Spirit. Of highest importance for Calvin is that we must be united to Christ. The first two books of the *Institutes* underscore that need. There are vast benefits that come to regenerated believers in our gracious union with the resurrected and triumphant Christ. Christ, the firstborn among brethren, must become our head and we must put him on. This union is an intimate marriage between the holy and powerful Christ and his bride where we actually become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. It is also the direct result of the powerful Holy Spirit's action. Because of the love of the Father and the redemptive work of Christ in time, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, keeps us united to Christ despite our wicked and filthy sin, and causes us to possess him.<sup>3</sup>

The way in which the Holy Spirit works is called faith. To be united to Christ requires the exercise of faith. Calvin acknowledged that some have heard the gospel preached many times but have not embraced Christ. While not mentioned by Calvin at this place, the issue of faith connects to Christ's teaching on the prodigal son. The prodigal was bankrupt, filthy, and starving. He was desperate to be relieved of his miserable condition. That is the condition of all sinners who hear the sweet gospel of Christ. The reason why so many prodigals fail to make their calling and election sure is that they do not have faith. Faith only comes by "the secret energy of the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup> Faith is, in fact, the principal work of the Holy Spirit relative to believers. It is the Spirit's work that draws believers to the gospel and is generally defined as faith.

Calvin, consistent with his theological method in general, developed his theological reflection on this most important topic exegetically. For example, the apostle John contrasted flesh and blood with faith when he said, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13, ESV). Calvin viewed this teaching to be similar to what Jesus said at Matthew 16:17, when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, and Christ responded "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." In both

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<sup>3</sup> "The same purpose is served by that sacred wedlock through which we are made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, and thus one with him. But he unites himself to us by the Spirit alone. By the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members, to keep us under himself and in turn to possess him." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), III.i.3, 541.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.1, 537.

cases, flesh and blood means remaining in unbelief, and it is only by faith that believers receive Christ.

Calvin's teaching is also confirmed by Paul. In Ephesians 1:13 the Apostle said: "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." Calvin comments that "Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears."<sup>5</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:13 also teaches that the source of faith is the Holy Spirit.

However, Calvin says that John is even more clear than Paul in three other places: 1 John 3:24 ("Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us."), 1 John 4:13 ("By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.") and 1 John 4:17.

Calvin summarized his thinking beautifully: "... perfect salvation is found in the person of Christ. Accordingly, that we may become partakers of it he baptizes us in the Holy Spirit and fire, bringing us into the light of faith in his gospel and so regenerating us that we become new creatures; and he consecrates us, purged of worldly uncleanness, as temples holy to God."<sup>6</sup>

Calvin acknowledged that there is an intimate relationship between Christ and his work and that of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who is the bond by which Christ unites us to himself. Therefore, he says, "There is good reason for the repeated mention of the 'testimony of the Spirit,' a testimony we feel engraved like a seal upon our hearts, with the result that it seals the cleansing and sacrifice of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

In our natural state we were destitute and lost—but now, by the Holy Spirit's action, believers have been made Christ's disciples. But this work of the Holy Spirit, uniting us to Christ, has another component—it is also a work of separation. The Holy Spirit separates his bride from the world and places a hope of eternal life in our hearts. For this reason, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of sanctification by Paul at Romans 1:4 and 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and by Peter 1 Peter 1:2.

In the midst of this very practical section of his great book, Calvin discussed the intertrinitarian relationship between the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation. The Father gives the Spirit for the sake of the Son—yet the Son is the steward of the Father's liberality. Calvin says that the Holy Spirit is sometimes called the Spirit of the Father and at other times the Spirit of the Son.

In our union with Christ believers possess the Holy Spirit. He dwells within us. The Father is the author of this gift, for which we give him praise. Yet Christ is the distributor of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is given to believers according to Christ's good measure or gift as Paul teaches at Ephesians 4:7.

There is a reason why the Spirit is termed the Spirit of Christ. Of course, as two members of the divine Trinity, they are joined or united. Yet, there is the additional aspect of Christ's economic or practical work as mediator. There would be no power to his work as mediator were Christ—as the second Adam, whom Paul designates with the unique title of life-giving-Spirit at 1 Corinthians 15:45—not able to draw us to himself. In this way he is contrasted to wicked natural human life outside of salvation. This life of grace in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, Paul calls the fellowship

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.4, 541.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.4, 541.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.1, 538.

of the Spirit at 2 Corinthians 13:14. Without this life of grace people cannot experience God the Father's favor. This is what Paul means at Romans 5:5 when he said that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."<sup>8</sup>

### *Calvin on the Titles of the Holy Spirit*

God is certainly known by his works, but especially by his names. Calvin believed that it was important to investigate specific titles for the Holy Spirit under the heading of the believers' salvation. He provided a number of major and minor titles and described each. We will look at only five.

First, the precious Holy Spirit is termed the Spirit of adoption. The third Person of the Trinity testifies to God's benevolence in that the Father has embraced his own in his beloved Son and thus become a Father to believers. This Spirit of adoption has direct relevance to the practice of prayer because a good father gladly hears a son's petitions. Christ underlined this truth when he taught believers to pray "Abba, Father".

Second, the Holy Spirit is also called the guarantee and seal of our inheritance. As believers walk as miserable pilgrims in this dark and damp world, Calvin says that at times we resemble dead men, so we are reminded of heavenly blessing and salvation. Our salvation does not rest in our own feeble hands but is safely secured in God's care—which thankfully never fails.

Third, the Holy Spirit is described as living water. While the temperatures are cooling after a hot summer, we all know how necessary water is for life. Calvin says that it is the Holy Spirit who was in mind when Isaiah cried out at 44:3 ("For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.") and later at 55:1 ("Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters..."). Christ's statements in the New Testament correspond to this Old Testament theology when he announced that "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me" at John 7:37. In a similar fashion, the Holy Spirit makes believers fruitful to manifest righteousness. Water also functions as a cleanser and purifier. There are no clean bodies, dishes or clothes without water. Ezekiel 36:25 promises clean water to wash away the people's filth.

Finally, Calvin notes that the Holy Spirit is also referred to as oil and anointing. While the figure of anointing with oil is foreign to most of American 21<sup>st</sup> century life, the king or queen of England is still anointed with oil at their inauguration. Likewise, in the Old Testament, prophets and kings were set apart to office by anointing with oil. A vital New Testament image of using oil is to restore and nourish the recipient to health and vigor. Uniting these varying biblical images in the person and work of the Spirit, John says at 1 John 2:20, "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge"; and, a few verses later, at verse 27: "but the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything—and is true and is no lie, just as it has taught you abide in him."

The final title is fire—which is another powerful image. Fire can be greatly beneficial. While Calvin did not use this example, a cold uncooked piece of meat is not very appetizing. But place it on a hot grill, and it is delicious! So too the Holy Spirit takes our cold and raw hearts and warms them to the love of God. On a cold winter night a cheery fireplace warms our bodies, and similarly the Holy Spirit warms us to greater and deeper piety and devotion. But fire can also be brutally destructive. A surgeon will sometimes use lasers and burning to destroy unwanted tissues and

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.2, 539.

cancers. Such a medical procedure is a positive destruction. In a similar fashion the Holy Spirit burns away our cancerous and wicked desires.<sup>9</sup>

### The Means of Grace and the Church

After the believer's initial union with Christ effected by the Spirit, Calvin was convinced that believers needed help—so that their faith might increase and that they may move on toward the goal of the Christian life. To all of those ends, God gave the church, Christ's bride. Let's examine the church and the means of grace empowered through the Holy Spirit.

For Calvin, any doctrine must be grounded in the Scriptures, and this is also the case for his theology of the means of grace and the church. Calvin's notion of the Holy Spirit bearing witness in our hearts directly through the read and preached word was intimately related to his doctrine of scripture. In the Old Testament, God made it clear that he wanted his word to be preserved. That word spoke of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> It spoke perfectly, for as Calvin said in his *Institutes*, it was "composed under the Holy Spirit's dictation."<sup>11</sup> Turning to the New Testament, it was the Spirit's work to bring to the apostolic writer's minds what our Lord had taught by mouth. Thus, he termed the Spirit "the key that unlocks for us the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>12</sup>

Since the Old and the New Testaments are perfect, and since the Bible has been preserved, then neither individual men nor groups, such as the church, can set forth some type of new doctrine or preach a cleverly created gospel.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Calvin's teaching does not mean that the Scriptures are always easy to follow. Therefore, the church is important to a right understanding of Scripture. The church possesses the whole Word of God in all of its authority, and the Holy Spirit, who is active in the church, guides and directs her in all truth. Thus, when the church rightly expounds the Word of God, the church speaks authoritatively, and its teaching must be obeyed because it is, in a sense, an authentic oracle of God.<sup>14</sup>

According to Calvin, living in the midst of Christ's church is necessary to the Christian life. The church is like our tender and nurturing mother because it is through her that we have been birthed to life.<sup>15</sup> Like a good mother, the Church preserves and protects her beloved children.<sup>16</sup> In continuity with his parenting imagery, Calvin added the role of Father and applied that task to

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin also provided a number of minor images. The Holy Spirit is called life because of righteousness [Rom. 8:10]; the spring like the source of all heavenly riches [John 4:14]; and the hand of God by which he exercises his might. See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.3, 540.

<sup>10</sup> "When I say this, I mean that God has never manifested himself to men in any other way than through the Son, that is, his sole wisdom, light, and truth. From this foundation, all the prophets have also drawn every heavenly oracle that they have given forth." "But where it pleased God to raise up a more visible form of the church, he willed to have his Word set down and sealed in writing, that his priests might seek from it what to teach the people, and that every doctrine to be taught should conform to that rule." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.5, 1153.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.6, 1154.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.4, 542.

<sup>13</sup> "God deprives men of the capacity to put forth new doctrine in order that he alone may be our schoolmaster in spiritual doctrine as he alone is true (Rom. 3:4) who can neither lie nor deceive. This rule pertains as much to the whole church as to individual believers." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.9, 1158.

<sup>14</sup> "Inasmuch as the church is governed by the Spirit of God, it can proceed safely with the Word; no matter where it may go, it can think or speak only what is true; accordingly, if it should ordain anything beyond or apart from God's Word, this must be taken as nothing but a sure oracle of God." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.13, 1162.

<sup>15</sup> "For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother..." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.4, 1016.

<sup>16</sup> "Not only does the Lord through forgiveness of sins receive and adopt us one for all into the church, but through the same means he preserves and protects us there." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.21, 1035.

God's pastors in the church. Specifically, Calvin likened the role of a pastor to a father who cuts his children's meat while they are seated at the table.<sup>17</sup>

Born to life by the Holy Spirit in the church, nurtured and nourished by the church, parented in the church, Christians, like adult children, must therefore give back to the church that which is her due. Since God is the common Father of all believers, and Christ is the head over the members of the church, and all possess the same Holy Spirit, then individual members should treat each other with love and act toward others as they truly are—beloved brothers.<sup>18</sup> Those who are united to Christ must be loyal to the visible church.<sup>19</sup>

Life in Christ is life in the true church. Such a church is built up by the preaching of God's word within the context of God's prescribed order of worship.<sup>20</sup> In public worship, God's people are brought up into God's very presence.<sup>21</sup> While the benefits that come to God's people through preaching and sacraments are ultimately from the Holy Spirit, those benefits come through the work of ordained ministers.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, Calvin had a high view of preaching. He viewed preaching as an incomparable treasure,<sup>23</sup> and offered a number of good reasons why the congregation needed to listen carefully to the preached word and to obey it. First, ministers in the pulpit are God's voice who through the ministry of the preached word speak to God's people, as it were, face to face.<sup>24</sup> God wants to speak to his people not just through the written word, but also through the preached word.<sup>25</sup> Such a divine condescension on God's part brings both great honor, as well as heavy responsibility, to the

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), 115-7.

<sup>18</sup> *Institutes* IV.1.3, 1014-1015.

<sup>19</sup> Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 245.

<sup>20</sup> "We must hold to what we have quoted from Paul—that the church is built up solely by outward preaching, and that the saints are held together by one bond only: that with common accord, through learning and advancement, they keep the church order established by God (cf. Eph. 4:12)." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5, 1019.

<sup>21</sup> "Nevertheless, he laments that he burns, is tormented and well-nigh consumed, with this single trouble, vexation, and sorrow. Surely, this is because believers have no greater help than public worship, for by it God raises his own folk upward step by step." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5, 1019. Likewise, in discussing "the power of the keys", Calvin writes that "This benefit [the forgiveness of sins] so belongs to the church that we cannot enjoy it unless we abide in communion with the church." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.22, 1036.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin continues, "Thirdly, it [the forgiveness of sins] is dispensed to us through the ministers and pastors of the church, either by the preaching of the gospel or by the administration of the sacraments." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.22, 1036.

<sup>23</sup> Wallace, *Word & Sacrament*, 89. For more information, see Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la creation et la Providence dans la predication de Calvin* (1981), "L'homilétique de Calvin" in *Interpretes de la Bible*, (Paris, 1980), Richard Stauffer, "Les discours à la première personne dans les sermons de Calvin" in *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses* (1965), Rudolphe Peter, "Rhetorique et prédication selon Calvin" in *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses* (1975), and Erwin Mühlhaupt, *Johannes Calvin, Diener am Wort Gottes, Predigten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934).

<sup>24</sup> "... God has vouchsafed to feed us like little children with it [the Word] by sending us mortal men to speak it to us face to face... for our faith cannot be without humility, and God tests it in making mortal men to be the means by which he communicates himself to us." Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians 2:19-22*, 215. See also his commentary on Isaiah 55:11 and Haggai 1:12 as cited by Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word & Sacrament*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> "Today it is his will to teach us through human means." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5, 1017. On the next page, he writes that "among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he designs to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them" Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5, 1018. See also his commentary on Isaiah 50:10 and Hebrews 2:11 as cited by Wallace, *Word and Sacrament*, 83.

preacher.<sup>26</sup> One reason why preachers are God's voice is because the preacher can present nothing of his own invention but only what has been revealed by God in his own word.<sup>27</sup> For Calvin, preaching is not equal to scripture. Preaching is derivative and subordinate.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the connection between God and his word and a proper sermon is so close that a properly ordained and installed minister can be called "a minister of the Spirit."<sup>29</sup>

Calvin used three strong visual images to describe the way in which God speaks to his people in the sermon.<sup>30</sup> First, preaching is a token of the Lord's presence and a means whereby he comes near to us. Through preaching, Christ's gifts are conveyed to his beloved people.<sup>31</sup> Second, preaching is analogous to the work of an ambassador. In Calvin's day, the ambassador would speak for a prince, just like the US ambassador today speaks for the President.<sup>32</sup> Ordained ministers "serve as [God's] ambassadors in the world," said Calvin, "to be interpreters of his secret will and, in short, to represent his person."<sup>33</sup> Finally, Calvin describes preaching as a tool in the hands of God. As a skillful craftsman carefully creates his work manipulating various tools to produce his object, so God uses the preacher to accomplish his work.<sup>34</sup>

These three powerful visual images could wrongly place emphasis on the quality of the words of the sermon. However, that would be a mistake. Basic tools may have a functional beauty to them but the source of the tool's value is in the hands of the craftsman. The sermonic craftsman for Calvin was not the preacher himself but God the Holy Spirit. Likewise, ambassadors are usually people of ability, but the ambassador's power is not in his or her own personality but the authority of the political figure sending the ambassador. Furthermore, the notion of preachers delivering a sermon as representatives of God's physical presence does not mean that preachers should

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<sup>26</sup> "For St. Paul does not mean that one should just make a parade here or that a man should show off so that everyone applauds him and says, 'Oh! Well spoken! Oh! What a breath of learning! Oh! What a subtle mind!'" said Calvin commenting on 1 Tim. 3. "All that is beside the point... When a man has climbed up into the pulpit, is it so that he may be seen from afar, and that he may be pre-eminent? Not at all. It is that God may speak to us by the mouth of a man. And he does us that favor of presenting himself here and wishes a mortal man to be his messenger." T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 24-25.

<sup>27</sup> "This is such a usual theme with him, repeated hundreds of times, that there is no need to support it with quotations. The preacher shall declare only what has been revealed and recorded in Holy Scripture." Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> "God presides; the pulpit is his throne, he is in the midst, as if visible, face to face; the Church is joined to him. In other words, granted the distinction of primary and secondary which must be maintained between Scripture and preaching, the same message is powerful and effective in the one as in the other." Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Wallace, *Word & Sacrament*, 91.

<sup>30</sup> "If the preacher faithfully hands on what he himself has learned in the school of God, then God himself 'presides', he is 'in the midst', as if he were showing himself visibly or face to face, and his people are 'joined' to him. Our Lord Jesus Christ is present and the Church is 'united' with him. The pulpit is 'the throne of God, from where he wills to govern our souls.'" Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> See Calvin's *Commentary on Isaiah* 11:4; 50:2; 55:6; and 1 Peter 1:25, as cited by Wallace, *Word & Sacrament*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> "Fully empowered by the prince, the ambassador may say: we want this done. He does not depreciate the power of the prince but simply speaks with the same authority as the prince." Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 27-29.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.1, 1053. See also Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin, Expository Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 57.

<sup>34</sup> "Because he does not dwell among us in visible presence (Matt. 26:11), we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.1, 1053.

employ smoke and mirrors to enhance their appearance like the Wizard of Oz when preaching. In all of these strong images, the divine reality was present not through the power of vivid language, but by the Holy Spirit's working.<sup>35</sup>

With Calvin's high view of preaching we need to address a difficult practical issue which was a problem during Calvin's era and continues to be a problem in today's congregations as well. There were then and there are men now who are set apart for gospel ministry who are not preeminently endowed with intellectual and speaking gifts, but are nevertheless rightly called to that high office by God. As such, even these men must also be heard and obeyed.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Calvin says that God sometimes lifts up rather vile and worthless persons as ministers. It is true that all preachers are contemptible mortals who have just emerged from the dust—but some actually have fewer gifts than do the members of their congregation.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless they must be heard, and Calvin offers some of the reasons why.

One of the believer's obligations is what Calvin terms the true hearing of preaching. Calvin mentioned that the peculiar path of proclamation, an avenue which God specifically chose, tests the congregation's obedience to God. "He proves our obedience by a very good test" said Calvin, "when we hear his ministers speaking just as if he himself spoke."<sup>38</sup>

From the congregation's perspective, there are undoubtedly hard parts to that proclamation. Sometimes a sermon is difficult to hear because the pastor's words cut to the disciple's tender heart. Nevertheless, the people must not rebel against God's good and wise instruction.<sup>39</sup> The Word of God as preached simply had to be obeyed. The congregation must maintain a proper attitude toward preaching. The congregation should not simply be a passive audience during the Word's proclamation.<sup>40</sup> The congregation must be willing to obey what they hear from God, with no reserve.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 29.

<sup>36</sup> "Again, this is the best and most useful exercise in humility, when he accustoms us to obey his Word, even though it be preached through men like us and sometimes even by those of lower worth than we." "But when a puny man risen from the dust speaks in God's name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we shod ourselves teachable toward his minister, although he excels us in nothing." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.1, 1054.

<sup>37</sup> Wallace, *Word & Sacrament*, 117-8.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* IV.i.5, 1018. On the previous page, Calvin speaks of the just punishment of those who reject the Word spoken by the preacher: "From this it follows that all those who spurn the spiritual food, divinely extended to them through the hand of the church, deserve to perish in famine and hunger." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5, 1017. The rejection of the Word by the ungodly is a struggle for prophets and preachers in every age. Yet, to reject the Word is foolish: "This is like blotting out the face of God which shines upon us in teaching" Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5, 1018.

<sup>39</sup> In Calvin's sermon on 2 Timothy 3:16, Calvin says that "the people must not say, 'Ho! That is too hard to be borne. You ought not to go on like that'. Those who cannot bear to be reproved had better look for another school-master than God. There are many who will not stand it: 'What! Is this the way to teach? Ho! We want to be won by sweetness'. 'You do? Then go and teach God his lessons!' These are our sensitive folk who cannot bear a single reproof to be offered to them. And why? 'Ho! We want to be taught in another style.' 'Well then, go to the devil's school! He will flatter you enough—and destroy you.'" Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 95.

<sup>41</sup> "...yet the preaching might have little or no effect, if the attitude of the congregation were not all that it should be. The congregation makes or breaks the effect of a sermon, according to whether or not they come in the right attitude. The only proper attitude for hearing a sermon is the attitude of willingness to obey God completely and with no reserve." Nixon, *John Calvin*, 65.



Sadly, while a preacher may be called by God, and preach only the word, nevertheless that preaching may bear very little fruit in the congregation's life. It is undoubted that there can be a satanic hardening of individual hearts against the Word.<sup>42</sup> Calvin proclaimed in a sermon on Job that to hear God's Word preached and not obey it is like a warrior who owns fine armor, but then hangs up the armor and leaves it to rust.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, Calvin was rightly convinced that there is power in God's Word independent of the recipients.<sup>44</sup> Whenever there is true and effective ministry in the church then good fruit will blossom in the lives of the congregation's members. Calvin actually specified the nature of that fruit. He tells us that men who had previously lived notorious lives had been changed. Even those who had been good and respectable had seen improvements. Finally, men and women who had not been able to have clear consciences could now go into God's presence with joy in their hearts.<sup>45</sup> This is all the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, Calvin's *Institutes* present who God is in his majestic holiness, and who we are in our wretched state of sin and our great need for salvation. Salvation is Christ's work that is applied by the Holy Spirit. On our own we have nothing but darkness of mind and perversity of heart, but the Holy Spirit so works in us that we are ruled by his prompting. That connects everything back to a faithful walk in the life of the church. In the church the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts through both the written and the preached word.

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<sup>42</sup> Wallace, *Word & Sacrament*, 93.

<sup>43</sup> Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 219.

<sup>44</sup> Wallace, *Word & Sacrament*, 92.

<sup>45</sup> "But is there no fruit in this, that many who are truly pious feel their obligation to us, in that they have at length learned to worship God with a pure heart, and to invoke him with a calm conscience, have been freed from perpetual torments, and have furnished with true delight in Christ, so as to be able to confide in him. But if we are asked for proofs which every eye can see, it has not fared so unhappily with us that we cannot point to numerous sources of rejoicing. How many who formerly led a vicious course of life have been so reformed as to seem converted into new men? How many whose past lives had been free from censure, nay, who were held in the highest estimation, have, instead of retrograding, been able to testify by their conduct that our ministry has proved neither barren nor unfruitful?" John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 201.