

CHAPTER ONE- INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

When referring to John Calvin the reformer, we will normally think of his theological writings, commentaries, or his doctrine of predestination. Indeed, Calvin's most important works are his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and his extensive commentaries on the Bible, but we may often ignore the fact that he had spent the most of his time and efforts in teaching and preaching the Bible. John Dillenberger says that Calvin assumed that his whole theological labor was the exposition of Scripture.¹ Calvin said in his last will: I have endeavored, both in my sermons and also in my writings and commentaries, to preach His Word purely and chastely, and faithfully to interpret His sacred Scriptures.² All Calvin's effort is made in order to preach clearly the Word of God.

Early reformers Luther and Zwingli insisted the supremacy of the Word over sacrament. Both Luther and Calvin agreed that their most important work of all is preaching. Luther said, the Reformation gave centrality to the sermon. The pulpit was higher than the altar, for Luther held that salvation is through the Word, and without the Word the elements are devoid of quality, but the Word is sterile unless it is spoken.³ John Calvin fully agreed with Luther's exalting the sermon, and insisted preaching the Word the center of worship, so that believers can understand God's teaching through worship⁴. The Reformation recovered the centrality of preaching in

¹ John Calvin-*Selections from His Writings*, Edited and with an Introduction by John Dillenberger, P14

² Ibid P35

³ John Scott, *I believe in Preaching*, Published by Hodder & Stoughton Religious Books, 1998, P23. Bainton, Erasmus. P348

⁴ Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965, P162.

worship; it didn't invent it. The early church featured powerful preaching through men like Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and Athanasius⁵. When commenting the Reformation period, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says: a revival of true preaching has always heralded these great movements in the history of the Church.⁶ On the contrary, errors and decay in preaching will inevitably lead to corruption of the Church.

However, in the centuries preceding the Reformation, preaching had been a practice in steady decline. Eclipsed by the Mass and rendered non-essential by the theology of medieval Roman Catholicism, preaching had lost the primacy it had once enjoyed in the days of the early post-apostolic church⁷. In the Church history whenever there is a decline of preaching, there will be a decline of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church by the time of Reformation despised the Word, but valued the Mass, bishops and popes sat on Christ's throne, tradition pushed aside Scripture, superstition corrupted worship, and Mary and the saints became the recipients of prayer and adoration,⁸ taught on Purgatory which led to the selling of indulgences, it was so corrupted that it lost the marks and effect of the true Church. Calvin says a true church is recognizable by the marks of the true preaching and faithful hearing of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments.⁹

Martin Luther says, as for him, preaching the Word of God is the center of church, the real foundation and instrument for either personal change or reform the Church.

⁵ Dr. Jeff Robinson, *The Case for Sermon-Centric Sundays*
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/case-sermon-centric-sundays/>

⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, P.24-25 (First Zondervan printing March 1972)

⁷ Michael Reeves, president and professor of theology at Union School of Theology in Oxford, England.
<https://www.9marks.org/article/what-role-did-expositional-preaching-play-in-the-reformation/>

⁸ Joel R. Beeke, *Reformed Preaching*, Published by Crossway 2018, P57

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed, J.T. McNeill, Introduction, lxi

I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example, I opposed indulgences and all the papist, but never with force. I simply taught, preached and wrote God's Word, otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept (cf. Mark4:26-29)...I did nothing; the Word did everything¹⁰.

Among the early theologians who developed Luther's sole Scripture theory, the greatest one was John Calvin, whose opinion is in a considerable degree consistent with Luther's, especially in the absolute authority of the Bible. Calvin believes that when the Bible is opened and rightly explained, the sovereignty of God is directly exerted over the congregation. As a result, he holds that the minister's chief mandate is to preach the Word of God. He writes, "Their [ministers'] whole task is limited to the ministry of God's Word; their whole wisdom to the knowledge of His Word; their whole eloquence, to its proclamation."¹¹ With this deep conviction about biblical authority, Calvin repeatedly entered the pulpit to minister exclusively from "the pure foundation of the Word."¹²

The great events and achievements of that mighty revolution were largely the work of preachers and preaching; for it was by the Word of God, through the ministry of earnest men who believed, loved and taught it, that the best and most enduring work of the Reformation was done. And, conversely, the events and principles of the movement powerfully reacted on preaching itself, giving it new spirit, new power, new forms, so that the reaction between the Reformation and preaching may be succinctly described as one of mutual dependence, aid and guidance¹³.

Luther tore down the false foundation of the Roman Catholic Church with his earnest and courageous preaching, while Calvin established a complete theological system- Institutes of the Christian Religion, which become a very important and solid foundation for the reformed

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Collected Works of Martin Luther*, The Second Sermon, first Published in the United Kingdom in 2019, Parts Edition by Delphi Classics, P1617/ 18571,E-Book www.delphiclassics.com

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536 edition), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), P195. Quoted from Steven J. Lawson, *The expository Genius of John Calvin*, E-Book,46/195.

¹² J. Graham Miller, *Calvin's Wisdom: An Anthology Arranged Alphabetically by a Grateful Reader* (Carlisle, PA, and Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), P254.

¹³ Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching Vol. I*, P366~367.

church and even Protestantism. His interpretation of the Bible is rigorous in logic and loyal to the original text, carefully searching the historical background as well as the author's intentions. Calvin can be regarded as a model in biblical exegesis that most worthy of study since the Reformation.

Calvin agreed that Scripture cannot be understood theologically, unless it be first understood grammatically.” Before his time the mystical and allegorical method of explaining the Scriptures was very prevalent; according to which, the interpreter, dwelling very little or not at all upon the literal sense, sought for hidden and allegorical meanings. But rejecting this mode of interpretation, which contributed little to the right understanding of the word of God, and according to which the meaning was made to depend entirely upon the fancy of the interpreter, Calvin set himself to the investigation of the grammatical and literal sense, by a careful examination of the Hebrew text, and by a diligent attention to the drift and intention of the writer’s discourse.¹⁴

Luther, however, made a mistake on this point. In spite of his warnings against allegorical interpretation, he (Luther) continued using this arbitrary method of interpretation himself when the text did not yield “any other useful sense”.¹⁵ Calvin criticized that such speculations of Luther has no solidity¹⁶. Calvin’s exegesis is famous for rigorous logic and loyalty to the original text.

But in today’s church, as Apologetic theologian David F. Wells says that the decline in Bible knowledge in the churches has to be a large factor in the disintegrating moral culture of Christian life today. Its Bible knowledge has declined drastically in the churches since Sunday school programs are eliminated, expository preaching becomes unfashionable.¹⁷ Many Charismatic churches and churches that embrace prosperity theology refuse to offend anyone,

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary the book of Psalms*, Translated by REV. James Anderson, Introductory Notice V1 by J.A, p2-3, <http://www.ccel.org>,

¹⁵ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, Publisher: Fortress Press 1969, P95

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, chapter13:14, Translated from the original Latin, and compared with the French edition by The Rev. John King, E-Book, P170

¹⁷ David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World*, P46, Published by Eerdmans, 2008

they only emphasize emotions of the flesh, but not spiritual worship; they pander to audience instead of pointing out their sins; they prefer passionate emotion rather than pure theology; they prefer light and pleasant message rather than hard but biblical teaching. Many charismatics claim Christians still receiving, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, direct revelation from God when writing songs of books, when preaching or teaching, or when making decisions.¹⁸ Such kind of churches have already violated Calvin's biblical preaching. The Challenges that the Church facing today are far more tough and complicated than the time of the Reformation. Current charismatic churches and churches that uphold prosperity theology have long been influenced by post-modernism and other different trends of thoughts, their sermons are human oriented, twisting the Bible to satisfy human desires, such preaching is rejecting God's Words, no longer faithful to the Scripture. Preachers of such churches should learn from the principles and spirit of John Calvin in preaching.

1.2 Statement Of The Problem

Since the Reformation the Church was released from the bondage of the Roman Catholic Church, Bible study and interpretation were no longer the privilege of bishops and clergy. The teaching of the priesthood of all believers, as well as the translation and printing of the Bible enabled all believers to study God's Word freely, what a great blessing that God has given to universal church through the Reformation Movement. However, priesthood of all believers is often misunderstood. We easily confuse priesthood with service, thinking that all believers are pastors. This is not the meaning of "priesthood of all believers" by Luther and Calvin. Martin Luther acknowledges that: although we are all equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister

¹⁸ John MacArthur, Jr, *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective*, P15

and teach¹⁹. Since priesthood of all believers has been wrongly interpreted as everyone has the right to freely explain and preach the Holy Word, it has great side effects to the Church which has already been eroded in different ideological trends in the post-modern world. As a result, there emerges preaching that is human oriented, twisting the Bible only to meet human desires. At the same time, by the effect of pluralism and liberalism, there are thousands of different denominations in Christianity (according to the statistics of Christianity Today in 2012, there may be about 38,000 different Christian denominations)²⁰, which contradict each other in expounding and preaching the Bible. Moreover, the authority of the Bible and its infallibility and inerrancy are suspected by modern theology and liberal theology. Since the Church is built on the Scripture preached by the apostles and prophets, if the foundation is destroyed, what can the righteous do? (Psalms 11:3). Biblical expounding and preaching are taken place by speeches full of philosophy, history and literary stories; sermons centered on the glory of God are replaced by sermons centered on human desires, preaching that should be relying on the mighty power of the Holy Spirit through steadfast prayers are changed to speaking events attracting audience's attention by rock music, technology and entertainment. John Calvin's solid theological foundation in his preaching has been despised by modern liberal Christian churches and prosperity churches, as in their opinions his theology can't meet the preferences of people in an IT and post-modern age. The theology and preaching that are most faithful to the Word of God and His glory have been put aside. The Church today need to return and follow Calvin's spirit and principles in preaching.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:356

²⁰<https://web.archive.org/web/20120207192707/http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm> There are approximately 38,000 Christian denominations in the world. This statistic takes into consideration cultural distinctions of denominations in different countries

1.3 Research Questions

What is the theological foundation of Calvin's expository preaching? What are his most important preaching principles and methods?

1.4 Thesis Statement

Calvin pays great importance to pure theological doctrine as a solid basis for interpreting the Bible, he says that we must always raise our hands to defend the purity of its doctrine, and we must not allow it to be corrupted in any way whatever.²¹ He wrote his Institutes of the Christian Religion in order to build a foundation for biblical exegesis.

Calvin not only concerns about doctrine and theology research, but also pays attention to heartily expository preaching and evangelism. His theology is not confined within doctrines and books, but can powerfully revive believers and the Church by lively exegesis and preaching. Calvin's sermons are full of applications. His preaching does not only pay attention to rhetoric, knowledge, expression skills and preaching methods, but focus more on biblical theology and earnest prayer in the Holy Spirit, so as to live a life of glorifying God and loving souls to witness the Word of God. All his preaching, teaching, evangelizing, comforting and exhortation are practicing his sound theology that are biblical, and are a model able to transcend the times and contexts. This paper will also have a briefly critique of the contemporary church's neglect of biblical exegesis and the pulpit's compromise with postmodernism and secularism.

²¹ John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Galatians*, P154

1.5 Purpose Of The Study

First, this research of Calvin's preaching is written for a final thesis as required by IRES for students enrolled in B.Th. program, and for my own interest of research as well. Through analysis and investigation into Calvin's preaching, I hope to find a model of pulpit ministry and establish for myself principles and spirit for future preaching service. Second, to look into Calvin's reformed theology and expository preaching which are lively and powerful, to investigate how it drive to reform and revive the Church, hoping that preachers who compromised in today's context of post-modernism will return from despising and forsaking expository preaching that grounded on solid theology, and follow Calvin's principles, attitude and spirit in their services.

1.6 Methods And Limitations

This paper will focus on the basic framework of principles of John Calvin's expository preaching. In chapter two I will state the key points of Calvin's theology. In chapter three I will mainly analyze the important principles of Calvin's expository preaching, and the characteristics of his experiential preaching since he was labelled an experiential theologian and preacher. In the fourth chapter I will look into the spirit of Calvin's service and his godly life, so as to clarify the importance of godliness to a preacher. We will mainly pick Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, his rich commentaries, sermons and letters, and the works of some contemporary theologians and authors who are deeply influenced by him.