

Calvin and World Mission

Thomas Schirrmacher
(Ed.)

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(Ed.)

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Contents

Schirrmacher: Introduction	9
Articles from 1882 to 2002.....	9
Not a defense of Calvinism.....	9
Predestination and Responsibility.....	11
The Reformed Origin auf Modern Protestant Mission	12
McFetridge: Calvinism As An Evangelizing Force (1882)	15
Schlatter: Calvin und die Mission (1909)	29
Kochs: Calvin und die Mission (1909)	41
Pfisterer: Der Missionsgedanke bei Calvin (1934)	47
I.	47
II.	50
III.	57
Edwards: Calvin and Missions (1936)	61
Zwemer: Calvinism and the Missionary Enterprise	
(1950)	67
I. Calvin and Missions.....	67
II. Calvinism and Islam.....	73
Van der Berg: Calvin’s Missionary Message: Some	
Remarks about the relation between Calvinism and	
Missions (1950)	79
Chaney: The Missionary Dynamic in the Theology of	
John Calvin (1964)	93
Introduction	93
I. Calvin’s Missionary Principles	95
The Calling of the Gentiles	95
The Progress of the Kingdom	97
The Gathering of the Church.....	98

Personal Christian Responsibility	100
II. Calvin's Missionary Influence	102
Calvin's Doctrine of Election.....	102
Calvin's Eschatology	105
Calvin's Concept of the Glory of God	108
Christian Compassion	108
III. Conclusions.....	109
Clowney: The Missionary Flame of Reformed Theology (1976)	111
The Glory of God – The Goal of Missions.....	112
The Grace of God the Source of Missions.....	114
The Kingdom of God the Power of Missions	118
Pogson: Calvin's Missionary Thought and Practice (1990)	123
Nicholls: The Theology of William Carey (1993)	129
Biblical Foundations.....	130
Christology for Mission.....	131
The Gathered Church.....	132
Faith and Culture	136
Integral Mission.....	138
Hulse: John Calvin and his Missionary Enterprise (1998)	141
An Outline of Calvin's Life.....	141
Missionaries sent into France	143
Conclusion.....	145
Van Neste: John Calvin on Evangelism and Missions (1998)	147
Introduction	147
Historical Context.....	147
Calvin's Writings.....	149
Calvin's Activity.....	151
Conclusion.....	153
Selected Bibliography	153

James, III: Calvin the Evangelist (2001)	157
Beeke: John Calvin: Teacher and Practitioner of Evangelism (2001)	163
Calvin: Teacher of Evangelism.....	164
Calvin: Practitioner of Evangelism.....	168
Evangelism in the Congregation.....	169
Evangelism in Geneva	171
Evangelistic Efforts in France.....	173
Evangelism in Brazil.....	174
Calvin’s Missionary Spirit and Election	177
A Word of Encouragement.....	179
Simmons: John Calvin and Missions: A Historical Study (2002)	183
Introduction	183
Calvin’s Theology of Missions.....	184
A Positive Statement.....	184
Charges against Calvin’s Theology of Missions.....	186
The Great Commission.....	187
Predestination	188
Calvin’s Missionary Endeavors	189
France	189
The Rest of Europe	191
Geneva: Refugee Center and Missionary Center.....	191
The Netherlands.....	192
England.....	193
Scotland	194
Poland.....	195
Hungary	196
Overseas Missions in Brazil	197
Conclusion.....	200
Bibliography	201
Works Cited	201
Extended Bibliography	202

Introduction

THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Articles from 1882 to 2002

At the end of the ‘Calvin-Year’, in which Christians all over the world celebrate Calvin’s 500th birthday, finally we emphasize Calvin’s role for establishing a Protestant mission theology which later led to a worldwide expansion of Protestant Christianity.

All articles from 1882 to 2002 have been left in their original version, with one exception: Joel R. Beek revised his article for this volume. The result is, that some information on Calvin can be found in several articles. But our aim was, to present major articles on the topic through 125 years of history and from different viewpoints, not to give one polished latest opinion on the topic.

Some of the articles discuss Calvin and his writings and thinking on mission alone. Some add the question, what kind of mission has been organized from Geneva during Calvins time, because Calvin did not only speak about evangelism and mission, but also helped establish it in reality, even though on a quite small scale compared to later centuries. Some articles go further, and follow the students and followers of Calvin and their relation to mission through history. Thus we sometimes have included the wider topic of ‘Calvinism and Mission’, whereby we leave it to the authors to define ‘Calvinism’ in a broader or narrower way.

The final article by Scott J. Simmons is a good summary of 125 years of history. It presents the latest findings as of 2002, shows a good common sense of the researchers, and his bibliography at the end is a good bibliography for the whole book.

Not a defense of Calvinism

This book has not been edited to defend ‘Calvinism’ and its dogmatic system. This has – even from Calvinism’s own firm position – to be done on exegetical grounds, not on historical ones. Even if one could prove that Calvinism was more prone to mission than say – Lutheranism or Methodism, this would be no argument to its truth, and one than also could be become Catholic, because the Jesuits surely were as busy as the Calvinists.

Even though this book is not a defense of Calvinism, some of the authors wrote their articles as a defense of Calvinism or at least as very convinced Calvinists. Others write more from a neutral point of view as historical researchers. The editor of this volume and the ‘Association of German Speaking Evangelical Missiologists’, that edits the series, are grateful to what the Reformed branch of the Reformation has given to evangelical mission thought and praxis, but are open to all branches of Evangelicalism who want to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as testified in Gods revealed Word. We believe, that dogma needs to be based on well informed exegesis taking into account the history of exegesis and dogma, not on historical arguments or samples of good or bad followers of a certain theology.

I already published a selection of articles on the theological ancestor of Calvin, the reformer Martin Bucer and his relation to Mission in the ‘edition afem’, as Bucer probably was the only real missiologist among the Reformers.¹ I also published the first dissertation which was written within our ‘Martin Bucer Seminary’ for a theological doctorate, on ‘Luther and Mission’², written by the late Paul Wetter. In both cases, as the historic research was mainly done by German speaking authors, the original contributions are mostly not available in English yet. We hope to translate the volume on Bucer into English in the future. The biographical volume on Bucer has been translated into English already and will be published soon. I also wrote a book on the theology of one of Calvins heirs, William Carey, which has been translated into English already.³ I am preparing a volume with English essays on Carey, too. Carey, even though in soteriology and other areas of systematic theology a Calvinist, was a Baptist. Thus my interest in ‘Calvin and Mission’ does not come from a narrow, confessional perspectives, but is interested in a broad discussion of the relationship of the ‘evangelical’ gospel as rediscovered in the Reformation to the history of world mission.

¹ Thomas Schirmacher (ed.). *Martin Bucer als Vorreiter der evangelischen Mission*. Nürnberg: VTR & VKW: Bonn, 2006; see also the yearbook of our Martin Bucer Seminary: Thomas Schirmacher (ed.). *Anwalt der Liebe – Martin Bucer als Theologe und Seelsorger*. VKW: Bonn, 2001; and my “Foreword Two: Bullinger and Bucer”. S. xiii-xx in: George M. Ella. *Henry Bullinger (1504-1575): Shepherd of the Churches*. GO Publications: Durham (GB), 2007.

² Paul Wetter. *Der Missionsgedanke bei Martin Luther*. VKW: Bonn, 1996.

³ Thomas Schirmacher. *Be Keen to Get Going: William Careys Theology*. RVB: Hamburg, 2001¹; 2008².

Predestination and Responsibility

Having said this, as a Reformed missiologist and editor of the German edition of the first edition of Calvin's 'Institutes of Christian Religion',⁴ I nevertheless would like to add two thoughts.

1. Calvin's doctrine of predestination never denied human responsibility towards divine commandments, including the Great Commission.⁵ Calvin was, after all, besides Martin Bucer the first and probably only Reformer to enjoin world mission. In 1556, he sent two missionaries to Brazil,⁶ although the mission was destined to fail.

Calvin was blamed at the same time to be too passive because of his doctrine of predestination, and to be too active and legalistic, because of his high view of God's commandment and man's responsibility and ability to fulfill it. But Calvin found both sides in the Bible and so both sides were true and important for him at the same time.

We should learn from Calvin, that Biblical teaching always has to be understood as complementarity. All revealed truth is true at the same time.⁷

Augustine, Aurelius (354-430), bishop of Hippo (North Africa), called the theologian of grace, is the most important theologian of the Roman Catholic Church and spiritual father of all major Reformers, especially Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. In most of his writings Augustine discusses problems of mission,⁸ as he was heavily involved in reaching heathen African tribal people and heathen Roman citizens. Gonsalvus Walter has com-

⁴ Johannes Calvin. *Christliche Glaubenslehre: Erstausgabe der 'Institutio' von 1536*. with an introduction by Thomas Schirmmacher. VKW: Bonn, 2008.

⁵ See Paul Jacobs, *Prädestination und Verantwortlichkeit bei Calvin* (Kassel, Germany: J. G. Oncken, 1937). For a modern Calvinist call for missions, see James I. Packer, *Prädestination und Verantwortung*, Neue Studienreihe 5 (Wuppertal, Germany: Brockhaus, 1964) [English title: *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*].

⁶ Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1959) p. 93; Louis Igou Hodges, *Reformed Theology Today* (Columbus, GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 1995) pp. 101-104.

⁷ For details see my "The Complementary Nature of Biblical Teaching", MBS Texte 29 (Theologische Akzente). Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminar, 2004, see under www.bucer.eu/international.html.

⁸ Gerhard Metzger, *Kirche und Mission in den Briefen Augustins*, Allgemeine Mission-Studien 20 (Gütersloh, Germany: C. Bertelsmann, 1936); and F. van der Meer, *Augustinus der Seelsorger* (Cologne: J. P. Bachem, 1958).

bined those quotations to a full-orbed theology of mission.⁹ Augustine reconciled the belief in double predestination with an urgent call, that it is the will of God to preach the Gospel everywhere. In his famous Letter No. 199,¹⁰ Augustine denies that the Great Commission was already achieved by the apostles because, exegetically, the commission goes “till the end of the world” and practically, he knows of “innumerable barbarian tribes in Africa to whom the gospel has not yet been preached.”¹¹ God had not promised Abraham the Romans alone but all nations. Before the return of Jesus Christ the majority of nations and people will become Christians.¹²

The Reformed Origin auf Modern Protestant Mission

2. Theologians and historians generally ignore the origins of modern evangelical world mission in the middle of the sixteenth century. Calvinist, mostly Puritan pastors, who had immigrated to America from England, preached the Gospel to the Indians.¹³

In 1915, Maurus Galm demonstrated that modern Protestant mission began in the Netherlands, where Calvinist theologians were inspired by the missionary efforts of the Catholic Church.¹⁴ Gisbert Voetius¹⁵ (1589-1656,

⁹ P. Gonsalvus Walter O. M. Cap., *Die Heidenmission nach der Lehre des heiligen Augustinus*, *Missionswissenschaftliche Abhandlungen und Texte* 3 (Münster, Germany: Aschendorff, 1921).

¹⁰ Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer ed., *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp. 259-264; Norman E. Thomas ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, op. cit., p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.* (both editions), Letter 199, Part 46.

¹² *Ibid.* (both editions), Letter 199, Part 47-49.

¹³ R. Pierce Beaver ed., *Pioneers in Missions: ... A Source Book on the Rise of the American Missions to the Heathen* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1966) pp. 11-15; see also my “Eschatology”. S. 106-110 in: John Corie (Hg.). *Dictionary of Mission Theology*. InterVarsity Press: Nottingham (GB), 2007.

¹⁴ Maurus Galm, *Das Erwachen des Missionsgedankens im Protestantismus der Niederlande* (München: Franz Xaver Seitz and St. Ottilien: Missionsverlag St. Ottilien, 1915). See the restrictions in A. Goslinga, “Die Anfänge der Mission in Holland”, *Allgemeine Missions-Zeitschrift* 49 (1922) pp. 56,63,79-85.

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, “Voetius, Gisbert”, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* Vol 3, ed. Kurt Galling (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986); Wilhelm Goeters, *Die Vorbereitung des Pietismus in der reformierten Kirche der Niederlande bis zur labadistischen Krise 1670* (Leipzig: 1911) pp. 80-134; Ernst Bizer, “Die reformierte Orthodoxie und der Cartesianismus”, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 55 (1958) pp. 306-372, on Voetius’ book ‘*Disputationen über den Atheismus*’ (1639) (Bibliographical information p. 308, note 2).

1634 Professor of Theology in Utrecht) discovered the connection between Reformed orthodoxy and the missionary orientation of Reformed Pietism¹⁶ and wrote a thorough missionary theology.¹⁷

Gisbert Voetius (1598-1676), 1634-1676 professor of theology and Oriental languages in Utrecht, Netherlands, was an active member of the Synod of Dordt (1617/19) and a chief proponent of Calvinistic orthodoxy and the most influential Dutch theologian of the 17th century. At the same time, he was one of the spokesmen of the emerging mission oriented Reformed Pietism in the Netherlands and had personal contacts to English Puritans. His book 'Disputations on Atheism' (1639) and other books against philosophies of his time show him to be an evangelist to the well educated. Voetius is also the founder of the comparative study of religions for missionary purposes. Nearly all his books and tracts contain long sections on mission, which do not appeal and call to mission work but discuss all major problems of mission scientifically as a fourth part of Systematic Theology 'Theologica elenctica' beside Exegetical, Dogmatic and Practical Theology. Thus Voetius designed the first comprehensive mission theology written by a Protestant. He was well-read in Catholic mission literature. Following a distinction made in Reformed ethics, Voetius combines double predestination as God's absolute will with the conviction that God's moral will is world mission under Biblical promises.

The strict Calvinist, Dutch theologian Adrian Saravia (1531-1613), pastor in Antwerp and Brussels, as well as professor in Leyden (1582-1587), finally Dean in Westminster, according to Norman E. Thomas, was the only Reformer who abandoned the view that the Great Commission had already been fulfilled by the apostles, an opinion already thoroughly refuted by Calvin.¹⁸ He had, however, forerunners of importance, such as the

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, "Voetius, Gisbert", op. cit., Col. 1432.

¹⁷ On Voetius' missiology, see: Jan. A. B. Jongeneel, "Voetius' zendingstheologie, de eerste comprehensieve protestantse zendingstheologie", *De onbekende Voetius*, ed. J. van Oort et. al (Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1989) pp. 117-147; H. A. van Andel, *De zendingsleer van Gisbertus Voetius*, *De onbekende Voetius* (Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1912). On Voetius' theology in general, see: J. van Oort, ed., *De onbekende Voetius*, (Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1989); Ernst Bizer, "Die reformierte Orthodoxie und der Cartesiaanismus", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 55 (1958) pp. 306-372. Wilhelm Goeters, *Die Vorbereitung des Pietismus in der reformierten Kirche der Niederlande bis zur labadistischen Krise 1670*, op. cit., pp.80-134.

¹⁸ Norman E. Thomas ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 41-43.

Church Father, Aurelius Augustine, who was also the precursor of the Calvinist soteriological view of double Predestination.

Chaney has emphasized that modern Protestant world mission began with two Calvinist groups: the chaplains of the Dutch East India Company and with the Puritans, who tried to reach the Indians of North America.¹⁹

The reason for the almost exclusively Reformed nature of Protestant world mission from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries was the rise of the Netherlands (The East Indian Trading Company was founded in 1602) and England as sea powers;²⁰ two Protestant countries, whose churches had Reformed Confessions.²¹

¹⁹ Charles L. Chaney, *The Birth of Missions in America*, op. cit., p. ix.

²⁰ Gustav Warneck, *Abriß einer Geschichte der protestantischen Missionen von der Reformation bis auf die Gegenwart*, op. cit., p. 39.

²¹ Philip E. Hughes, "Thirty-nine Articles", *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim, op. cit., p. 369. Hughes demonstrates that not only the Puritans, but also the Anglican Church was Reformed. The Thirty-nine Articles are Reformed in their view of the Scriptures, of salvation and of the sacraments. The standard commentary on the Thirty-nine Articles is W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (1930, repr. London: Vine Books, 1978) pp. xxxiii, xlix.