INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his masterful study of *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Last Things*, Heinrich Quistorp suggests that “If we call Luther the theologian of faith we may, even with exaggeration, characterize Calvin as the theologian of hope.” Thus, we may reasonably hope that Calvin has something to teach us about hope. But what questions shall we put to him?

Two other commonly accepted characterizations of Calvin can help us in framing this inquiry. First, Calvin was deeply shaped by and engaged with his social and historical context and, second, as a pastor and a Biblical theologian, he was vocationally committed to proclaiming and applying the Bible’s message to his contemporaries. Thus, we might well profit from asking about the understanding of hope that emerged as the result of Calvin’s efforts to speak the Bible’s word to his time and place. And, to further focus our investigation, we will take a kind of “best and worst” approach. What was the best of the fruits of Calvin’s work on hope? What was the worst?

So the path for our journey seems clear. We will need to begin with a brief – and unavoidably generalized – characterization of 16th Century Europe. That will put us in a position to introduce Calvin and make a few comments about how he both reflected and challenged his age. We will then consider a number of scriptural passages on the theme of hope and see how Calvin, in his commentaries, seeks to elucidate their meaning for his contemporaries. This, finally, will make it possible for us to offer a fresh assessment of Calvin’s legacy on hope. What was the best of its fruits and what the worst? The concluding section will suggest some implications of our findings.

CALVIN’S CONTEXT

Sixteenth century Europe was marked by all kinds of upheavals: intellectual, social, economic, political and religious. For our purposes, three hologram-like vignettes can help us catch a glimpse of that turbulent time.

First, in 1539 John Calvin, after preaching for two years to the very young Protestant church in Geneva, was banished from the city after a conflict with its leaders over control of the church. The Roman Catholic Church saw an opportunity and so commissioned Cardinal Sadolet to write to the Genevans and try to get them back in the fold. He managed, in quite convincing language, to suggest that the Reformers were merely trying to enrich themselves by taking over the church and, second, that the Genevans would have a much better chance of reaching heaven if they returned to the fold of Rome. In response, city leaders did not know what to say so they asked Calvin to respond for them. His famous treatise *Reply to Sadolet* was the result and in it Calvin argued that the Cardinal was not offering the Genevans any sound theology
because he was trying to motivate his readers by appealing to their self concern rather than by setting before people “as the prime motive of existence zeal to show forth the glory of God.”

The point here is that one dramatic and important feature of the sixteenth century was the struggle that resulted when the church divided and Protestant leaders like Calvin had to find convincing ways to legitimate the breakaway communions that emerged.

Second, Protestant leaders also had to decide the stance they would take toward the social and economic disruptions of their time. Martin Luther’s response to the revolt of the peasants in Germany is a case in point.

The gospel does not justify revolt but condemns it. All revolt. Neither wickedness nor injustice excuses revolt. True, the princes are wrong, the peasants right; the princes are unjust, the peasants are oppressed. But those who are not prepared to put up with evil here on earth are pagans.

It was, in other words, an age that saw the rise of what Andre Bieler calls “international commercial capitalism” and with it the beginning of the struggle between capital and labor. Protestant leaders such as Luther and Calvin were under great pressure from all sides to take a stand.

Finally, and in no small measure due to the changes already described, the sixteenth century was an Age of High Anxiety. William Bouwsma, who wrote one of our best biographies of Calvin, suggests that many people in Calvin’s time – including Calvin himself – felt themselves to be continually vacillating between experiencing the world as a labyrinth of inherited traditions and ways of thinking in which one might well get trapped and experiencing it as a deep and dark abyss of chaos by which those who try to flee the labyrinth might well be swallowed up. In other words, there was a nearly palpable anxiety about human freedom. One could try, as Calvin did, to walk the taut wire between the labyrinth and the abyss but one could not expect to do so without considerable anxiety.

INTRODUCING CALVIN

The above portrait of his age presents us with the opportunity to describe several features of Calvin’s own response to his times that will help us to hear him better when we turn to his commentaries.

First of all, and in response to the religious turmoil of his time, it is fair to say that Calvin’s thinking is pervaded by a tireless concern to establish the legitimacy of the Protestant movement. His commentaries are full of passages in which he seeks to distinguish his position from that of “the papists.” But what we will want to be alert for are any indications that this contested religious environment affected – or maybe infected – his presentation of Christian hope.
Second, Calvin saw more of a role for the church and for church leaders in the economic life of the community than did Luther. In fact, Bonnie Pattison argues that “Calvin knew that the only way to break the pride and presumption of the rich toward the poor was to end the segregation of the rich from the poor.” What is more, he thought that should be a goal for the church. Andre Bieler confirms that Calvin and his fellow pastors were frequently engaged in “protests against the ostentatious wealth” of people who cared nothing for the poor and destitute. But in what way, if any, does Calvin’s participation in such struggles impact the manner in which he interprets the hope he finds in scripture?

Finally, William Bouwsma maintains that even for his time Calvin was “unusually sensitive to anxiety...He brooded over it, and much of what he had to say was consciously intended to soothe a particularly troubled age.” We might expect, therefore, what we will actually find: that Calvin’s articulation of the hope that emerges from the gospel is deeply influenced – and strengthened - by this sensitivity.

A SELECTION OF COMMENTARY COMMENTS

The following scripture passages were chosen because their content was such that they seem to offer preachers or expositors an appropriate launching pad for announcing a word of hope to hearers or readers caught in the kind of turmoil and anxiety that characterized the sixteenth century. With the goal of letting Calvin’s own voice be heard, we will offer a brief summary of each text followed by a quote or quotes from one of Calvin’s commentaries.

Psalm 56:1-13

The Psalmist seeks to learn to trust God in times of persecution and fear.

Calvin on Psalm 56:3 ("When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.")

The true proof of faith consists in this, that when we feel the solicitations of natural fear, we can resist them, and prevent them from obtaining an undue ascendancy. Fear and hope may seem opposite and incompatible affections, yet it is proved by observation that the latter never comes into full sway unless there exists some measure of the former. In a tranquil state of mind, there is no scope for the exercise of hope. At such times it lies dormant and its power is only displayed to advantage when we see it elevating the soul under dejection, calming its agitations or soothing its distractions.

Isaiah 61:1-3

This is the last of the “servant songs” of Isaiah in which the Servant of the Lord declares that he has been anointed with the Spirit to bring good news to the poor and other blessings to the afflicted. But he has also been anointed to announce the coming judgment of God.

Calvin on Isaiah 61:2 ("To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor ("good pleasure"), and the day of vengeance of our God.")
These expressions appear to be inconsistent with each other, namely, “the day of good-pleasure” and “the day of vengeance.” Why did Isaiah join together things so opposite? Because God cannot deliver his Church without showing that he is a just judge, and without taking vengeance on the wicked. He therefore employs the term “good pleasure” with reference to the elect, and the term “day of vengeance” with reference to the wicked who cease not to persecute the church and consequently must be punished when the church is delivered.

Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes of Jesus promise the Kingdom of Heaven to the poor in Spirit.

Calvin on Matthew 5:3 (“Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”)

Luke (whose version is “Blessed are the poor...”) gives nothing more than a simple metaphor; but as the poverty of many is accursed and unhappy, Matthew’s “poor in spirit” expresses more clearly the intention of Christ. Many are pressed down by distresses, and yet continue to swell inwardly with pride and cruelty. But Christ pronounces those to be happy who, chastened and subdued by afflictions, submit themselves wholly to God, and, with inward humility, betake themselves to him for protection. We see that Christ does not swell the minds of his own people by any unfounded belief, but leads them to entertain the hope of eternal life, and animates them to patience by assuring them, that in this way they will pass into the heavenly kingdom of God. It deserves our attention, that he only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit: for they who are broken or overwhelmed by despair murmur against God, and this proves them to be of a proud and haughty spirit.

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and the Goats describes a scene of judgment in which the people of the world are divided into those who actively cared for the poor and those who did not. The former are welcomed into the king’s kingdom while the latter are punished.

Calvin on Matthew 25: 34b (“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”)

Before speaking of the reward of good works, Christ points out, in passing, that the commencement of salvation flows from a higher source: for by calling them “blessed of the Father,” he reminds them that their salvation proceeded from the undeserved favor of God. Though the life of the godly be nothing else than a sad and wretched banishment... the Lord declares that a kingdom is elsewhere prepared for them. It is no slight persuasive to patience, when men are fully convinced that they do not run in vain;
and therefore, lest our minds should be cast down by the pride of the ungodly, in which they give themselves to unrestrained indulgence, - lest our hope should even be weakened by our own afflictions, let us always remember the inheritance which awaits us in heaven; for it depends on no uncertain event, but was prepared for us by God before we were born – prepared, I say, for each of the elect, for the persons addressed by Christ are “the blessed of the Father.” (He thus) confirms the certainty of our hope by this consideration, that our life can sustain no injury from the commotions and agitations of this world. xiii

Romans 8: 18-30

Paul offers us here a cosmic vision of the entire creation restored and urges us to live by this hope. We were saved in such hope and though we cannot now see its fulfillment we can learn to trust God and wait in patience for God’s time.

Calvin on Romans 8: 24-25 (“For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”)

Since hope extends to things not yet obtained, and represents to our minds the form of things hidden and far remote, whatever is either openly seen or really possessed, is not an object of hope... As long as we are in the world, salvation is what is hoped for; it hence follows, that it is laid up with God far beyond what we can see. Paul means to teach us that since hope regards some future and not present good, it can never be connected with what we have in possession. God does not call his people to victory before he exercises them in the warfare of patience. But since it has pleased God to lay up our salvation, as it were, in his closed bosom, it is expedient for us to toil on earth, to be oppressed, to mourn, to be afflicted, yea to lie down as half-dead and to be like the dead: for they who seek a visible salvation reject it, as they renounce hope which has been appointed by God as its guardian. xiv

CALVIN’S LEGACY ON HOPE: THE BEST AND THE WORST

So how shall we assess Calvin’s legacy on hope? What were its best and worst fruits? What criteria can we use to make that determination?

We can begin by making a distinction between hope as a stance or attitude that stabilizes and strengthens people during hard times and hope as a vision of the future that inspires and guides people as they take appropriate responsibility for the enactment of the hopeful vision. The first focuses more on the hopeful disposition individuals need to assume to face the trials of life while the second looks more at the content of what is hoped for and its impact on those who await its coming. Since, it would seem, any full accounting of Christian hope should be able to address both dimensions of the topic, the following criteria questions are in order:
• How well does Calvin’s teaching on hope strengthen the hopeful disposition of his hearers so that they can face their daily trials with patience and equanimity?
• How well does Calvin’s teaching on hope articulate a vision that inspires people to take appropriate responsibility for the enactment of that vision in their own time and place?

The Best of Calvin: Doctor Hope Heals and Sustains Anxious Souls

It is to Calvin’s great credit that he refused to deny or ignore the painful persistence of anxiety in the believer’s life. Calvin was a theologian and pastor who worked the intersection between what he heard from the Word of God and what he observed of daily human experience, both his own and others. He was, as Bouwsma understood, a man poised on a tight wire between the anxiety that saturated the labyrinth of entrapping tradition and that emerging from the abyss of chaos that threatens those who dare to think for themselves and take “the road less traveled.” What is more, Calvin understood very well that everyone in his time and place in some way shared his predicament. Since he, both as pastor and as theologian, was committed to mediating between what he heard from the Word and what he observed in the world, it was nearly inevitable that anxiety—and how believers might better cope with it—would become for him a major theme.

In fact, it would not be too much of a stretch to say that Calvin’s sensitivity to anxiety was a major factor in his becoming the theologian of hope that Quistorp and others have described. But what is also clear from Calvin’s comments on Psalm 56 is that his understanding of the relationship of hope and anxiety led to a very dynamic—or one could say “interactive”—conception of the role hope can and does play in the believer’s life: hope “lies dormant” until it is activated by anxiety. But when it is activated, hope almost becomes a kind of “doctor of the soul,” lifting up the dejected, calming the agitated and soothing the distracted. Dr. Hope walked the tight wire with Calvin and he was eager and able to recommend its comforting ministrations to other troubled souls as well.


Several of the commentary quotes above, along with other sources we could cite, justify the conclusion that when it comes to the content of Christian hope Calvin saw salvation as something that awaits “the elect” in heaven. One suspects two things about this that warrant further study. First, it is likely that this is another demonstration of the way in which Calvin’s thinking is bound to the traditional ways of reading scripture he had inherited—and chose not to challenge—from the heritage of the church going back to the early Fathers. But, second, one also suspects that the strong emphasis placed on the elect receiving salvation in the next world resulted, perhaps without Calvin’s own full awareness, from the deep need he and other Protestants felt for a final vindication of their decision to break from Rome.

Still, what is striking in the commentaries we have cited is the way in which the “plain meaning” of the scriptural texts being considered has to be given a considerable twist before
they can yield the vision of salvation Calvin needs to find in them. Thus the Isaiah 61 passage is not really about good news for the poor, the brokenhearted and the captive; it is about the final salvation of the church and the damnation of its persecutors! Likewise, Jesus’ blessing in the Sermon on the Mount extends, not merely as Luke asserts, “to the poor,” but rather “to the poor in Spirit” who bear patiently with their poverty and refrain from murmuring against God. And, in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus’ point is not, as many have thought, to tie people’s eternal destiny to their treatment of others in need but rather to assure the elect that their heavenly home was prepared for them before they were born.

The result of Calvin’s exegesis is thus a truncated vision of the salvation God has promised. Where scripture often seems to foresee a kind of turning of the tables in which the rich and powerful come down and the poor and oppressed come up, Calvin only sees a reference to the Judgment Day when heaven and hell will receive their permanent occupants. Another way to say this is that for Calvin the salvation we await does not appear to include economic and political justice. Though this is somewhat surprising given the strong emphasis Calvin placed on the obligation of the rich to help the poor, it nonetheless seems to be the case that Calvin’s articulation of Christian hope offered the poor and oppressed of his time little more than did Luther’s: they should keep still and bear their cross with patience.

This deficiency in Calvin’s understanding of Christian hope becomes clearer if we ask ourselves what the world really needs from the church’s articulation of a reason for its hope. In his study of “the politics of hope,” Calvin scholar Andre Bieler put it like this:

The church’s mission, then, is not that of leading people to itself. Its task is on the contrary to prepare them (by bringing them together for this preparation) to participate with others in the global renewal of society in view of the new world. Its goal is the realization of an authentic humanity... We have seen that the prodigious powers given by Christ to men for the exploitation of creation and the harmonious development of society are powers that man is forever degrading... The great task of the church is nothing less than the restoration of these powers, both by proclaiming their intended purpose... and by subjecting them to the goals for which they were granted.

In other words, the church’s mission is to disclose to the world its destiny in the kingdom of God, to challenge and enable human beings to use their powers responsibly in the pursuit of that end and to critique them when they fail. Measured by such a standard Calvin’s hope seems to offer the world little more than a host of fear based reasons to be patient with the world’s status quo and to join with the church as it awaits, under the watchful care of Guardian Hope, a better time elsewhere.

CONCLUSION: SOME IMPLICATIONS

So what can we learn from Calvin about hope? The results of our study would suggest at least two important lessons, the first a positive lesson about how we nurture people in hopefulness and the second a negative lesson about how we interpret scripture.
So, first, Calvin’s understanding of the dynamic interaction between anxiety and hope could help us in the development of new strategies aimed at strengthening the hopeful disposition of believers. It is widely agreed that many lay Christians today lack the capacity – and maybe even the motivation – to connect the biblical story to their everyday lives. Calvin’s approach was really quite simple: when anxiety attacks, bring the story to mind that allows trust and hope to prevail. Efforts at Christian nurture that actually trained people to be able to do this could find a ready reception and be very helpful to those who participate.

But, second, we need to learn from Calvin the importance of being more self-critical than he was with regard to the way we describe the content of Christian hope. It is not too far off the mark to summarize Calvin’s position like this: the Bible says that those who understand the Bible like I do are bound for heaven and those who oppose us are in deep trouble. Two big questions can – and, indeed, ought to - be put to such a position. First, am I projecting onto the screen of the future the divisions in which I am currently caught and, therefore, exacerbating them? And, second, might there be a way of listening to the Bible that points in a more universal direction and thus offers hope for the entire world?

What is needed, of course, is a fresh exploration of biblical themes, like “the kingdom of God” or “the new creation,” that have the capacity to challenge all the parochial visions that continue to vex us while also offering a more comprehensive and justice embracing picture of the world that will, in God’s time, be born. What is also needed, though, are people with the ability to manage the anxiety that comes with – and too often subverts - such fresh thinking because they know how to counter it with hope.

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3 From Exhortation to Peace regarding the Swabian Peasants’ Twelve Articles; and also against the murderous spirit of brigandage on the part of other peasants now in revolt.”Quoted in Andre Bieler, Calvin’s Economic and Social Thought (Geneva, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2005) p.26.
6 Bonnie Pattison Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin (Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock: 2006)
7 Bieler, p. 139.
8 Bouwsma, p.32.
10 Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume V, pp. 349-50
11 Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume VIII, p. 306
12 Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XVI, pp. 260-1.
13 Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XVII, pp. 176-177
14 Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XIX, pp.309-310
15 See especially Quistorp’s conclusions, pp.192-193
16 1 Peter 3:15.