


# Calvin, Bucer and missionary opportunities in times of crises



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In this article it is argued that insights gleaned from John Calvin's and Martin Bucer's missionary passion and vision are relevant to contemporary missional churches in times of crises. First, Calvin's manifold personal crises in the 16th-century context were explored historically. Subsequently, modern missiologists and historians' views were critically engaged to ascertain how we could properly interpret the Reformers' missionary vision without drawing oversimplified and anachronistic conclusions. The widespread misrepresentations that often downplay the Reformers' resilient missionary vision were invalidated by explicating their lucid mission-mindedness during their time. It is indicated that much can be learned from their identity and practices as missionary pastors expanding the mission through pastoral care. The current COVID-19 pandemic and its deep impact present the global church with an opportunity to recommit itself to its essential missionary calling. Although Calvin or his colleagues did not create a complete theology of mission, the conclusion was made (through a thorough literature study and primary sources investigation) that their whole theology and Christian life had a missionary core. This challenges churches from a Reformed background today to critically reclaim their tradition and to mould their future missional identity from the roots up, crises and all.

**Contribution:** The lack of attention to John Calvin and his company of pastors' mission-minded theology and practice presents a contemporary challenge to the field of mission studies. This article expounded the often overlooked significance of the Reformers' essentially missionary theology and practice. This was done through a historical investigation, which eventually contributes relevant, contemporary insights from the 16th century to mission studies and missional churches today.

**Keywords:** John Calvin; Martin Bucer; crisis; missionary; COVID-19; reformed; missional; doors of opportunity.

## Introduction

The negative dimensions of a crisis usually grab our attention. Crises are typically defined as negative changes in environmental or human affairs that cause precarious situations which disrupt the lives of individuals, groups or all of society. However, as the Greek-Latin roots of the English word *crisis* denotes, a crisis presents an *opportunity* to decide or discern. In the words of missiologist, David Bosch (2011:3), 'crisis is to encounter the possibility of truly being the church ... Crisis is the point where danger and opportunity meet'. Current crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, elicits issues like suffering, vulnerability and resilience which, in turn, provide ample opportunity to discern constructive discourses on Christian mission in times like these.

*Crisis* is also a word that aptly reflects the core nature of our time, but it is not unique in the history of the world. Protestant church Reformers lived in the 16th century era which was fraught with testing times for the church of God. It would not be an overstatement to say that it was an ecclesiological emergency. In addition, the 16th-century body of Christ battled to survive amid wars, plagues and religious rows so violent that people believed it was better to kill their religious opponents, than to tolerate them (Holder 2020:436). Consequently, it yielded the opportunity to make crucial choices about how the church should change in order to embody a more truthful reflection of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As a second-generation Protestant Church Reformer, John Calvin grabbed this opportunity and committed his life wholeheartedly to the purpose of walking through the *open door* that God set before him to spread the good news. It is especially meaningful to note that Calvin, in the words of Horton (2014:31-32), 'arrived at his convictions not out of ivory-tower speculation or monastic

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contemplation, but out of constant crises, tests, disappointing setbacks, and personal suffering'. In the more than five centuries since Calvin's birth, an enormous amount of literature has been published on his theology in diverse ways and covering countless themes. However, the body of literature devoted to Calvin and his company of pastors' missiological theology and practice is very limited, presenting a contemporary challenge to the field of mission studies, especially as interpreted from a Reformed perspective. Modern day missiologists can benefit afresh from taking seriously the contexts in which Calvin and his company of pastors lived vis-à-vis our own. By doing so, we endeavour to interpret our forebearers not as mere distant figures or caricatures, but as meaningful partners in discerning the missionary character of the church today.

The purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to investigate the theme of 'crisis and mission' during the 16th-century church reformation in Geneva and beyond; (2) to explore the nature of Calvin and his company of pastors' (specifically including Martin Bucer's) missionary zeal; and (3) to attempt preliminary conclusions about how the aforementioned can be re-interpreted in a constructive way when churches, especially those from a Reformed background, engage in God's mission in the world today. In order to fulfil these aims, I offer an appreciative yet critical understanding of our predecessors, asking how we can open dialogue with contemporary churches about the findings.

The current COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching ramifications present the Christian church worldwide with an opportunity to discern what God is doing 'among us' through this global crisis, and to recommit itself to its essential missionary calling. Simultaneously, it also affords us the chance to re-appreciate Calvin's theology and practice of mission. Because Calvin's theology is not only a permanent, but also a present resource of Christian understanding and faith, Partee (2008:27) argues, it is 'not designed to exercise the mental muscles of academically trained professionals but to edify the Christian heart in the community of the faithful'. Indeed, the purpose with this article is not only to make an academic contribution, but simultaneously to ascertain how the missional orientation of Calvin's theology could edify the body of Christ today worldwide.

## Calvin's manifold personal crises mould his life and faith

The foreign policy of King Francis I (1515–1547) was the determining influence that shaped the historical trajectory of the church reformation in France. The French Roman Catholic Church's particular situation directly influenced the evangelical and reform movements that came into being there at the beginning of the 16th century. The reformation of a church is, however, not equal to the renewal of a commonwealth. For Calvin, it was an issue of how gospel and law should interact in a society that had lost its pope, bishops and dukes, but still had a king (Reid 2020).

Calvin was not the pioneer of Reformed theology, but his undoubtedly powerful influence led to the movement often being called by his name. However, now, long since his death, Calvinism and Reformed theology endured numerous crises and has inevitably changed in various ways. The issue of which changes positively developed it and which misconstrued it, remains a hot topic of considerable contemporary interest and debate. Thus, when studying the history of his influence, we obviously need to heed the fact that Calvin 'remains the most controversial reformer of the sixteenth century' (Gordon 2020:435). This reality challenges us to consider the history of Christian mission and Calvin's legacy in relation to our current missiological frameworks in careful but constructive ways. Since his death, Calvin has been represented by some of his foes as a heartless tyrant. To some extent, this unfavourable picture persists even today. Hence, we should take care to discern and form a balanced view of the nature of Calvin's historical reputation in order not to overly criticise or idealise the Genevan Reformer (Maag 2006).

Calvin was born on 10 July 1509 in Noyon, a cathedral city in Picardy, France. He took a realistic and serious life stance. Calvin had no illusions about the fact that human life is invaded by crises. As a pilgrim passing through this world, he experienced this as a refugee, patient, widower, etcetera, trusting in God's ever-present providential care for believers. Throughout his life, Calvin experienced a great deal of trials and losses. He had to struggle through the cross-cultural stress that accompanies a life in exile, that is, as a French refugee. His mother died when he was only six, and his father died when he was 21. Oftentimes he struggled financially, for example during his time in Strasbourg (in 1539), he did not receive a salary for 6 months and had to sell some of his books in order to keep alive (Stauffer 1971:34). Later, he and his wife (Idelette de Bure) were overwhelmed with grief at the loss of several small children (Gordon 2009:88). In addition, Calvin also had to process the death of his beloved Idelette.

Notwithstanding these personal crises and trials, he constantly articulated a mature faith in God's providence, exhibiting exceptional tolerance, perseverance and patience, summed up by some as *praxis pietatis* (De Reuver 2009). Calvin's understanding of God's providence was existential rather than merely dogmatic or doctrinal. His daily cup, albeit filled to the brim with challenges and suffering, was viewed as a chance to repent and to trust God in solidarity with Christ's own anguish. For him, the main issue was how to live through crises in union with Christ. Furthermore, he saw in crises the chance to not only turn towards God in utter dependence, but also to show concrete sympathy towards others in adversity.

In a sermon series of 159 sermons (starting in February 1554) to refugees (themselves Christian exiles and pilgrims who were often misunderstood, vulnerable and disrupted), Calvin

gave a realistic and comforting exposition of suffering. He re-affirmed that faith and piety do not protect believers from the afflictions of life, bringing into focus God's sovereign protection and presence as their primary source of steadfast hope as they journeyed toward their eternal home (McKee 2001:291). A significant factor often not taken into consideration, is that he brought these messages in a time of great turmoil in Geneva, whilst being mocked and experiencing minimal support for his costly efforts in order to reform the city (Thomas 2017:13–17). Moreover, Calvin's own experience of being a refugee, as well as his pastoral support and missionary efforts to refugees in both Strasbourg and Geneva, had a determining influence on his understanding of the church and ministry. Robert Vosloo (2009:38) aptly highlights that the 'refugee experience was a central part of Calvin's life'.

Except the above-mentioned crises in his life, Calvin also grappled with a huge workload, which he had to tackle with withering physical strength because of illnesses. His multiple health struggles impeded a more playful or light-hearted approach to theological issues (Cooke 1990). He suffered from migraines for most of his life. The 1550s brought escalating health issues and, since 1558, he was increasingly housebound. Three years later he was suffering from gout, haemorrhoids, consumption, along with agonising gallstones and kidney stones (Pak 2020:16). Herman Selderhuis's opening line of his book *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (2009), succinctly describes Calvin's reality:

Life is a steeplechase: there are dangers everywhere, and God himself, who has put most of the obstacles in our way, watches to see whether we make it over them. Such is John Calvin's view of life – and of God. Calvin never spoke of life as something fun, and his own wasn't. Many of his followers concluded that there shouldn't be any fun in life, and here they misunderstand him. (p. 7)

The existential threats of multiple crises in and around Calvin endured until his death on 27 May 1564. On his deathbed, Calvin recalled the situation he was confronted with upon his initial arrival in Geneva:

... when I came to this church for the first time, it was as good as nothing. There was preaching, but that was all. People were hunting for images and burning them, but there was no set form of reformation. *Everything was in chaos* (own italics). (Van 't Spijker 2009:42)

Shortly before his death, Calvin also shared with his church council, 'I have lived through many battles here. In the evening I was mockingly saluted with some fifty to sixty carbine shots' (Selderhuis 2009:256). Calvin died, well aware of his own shortcomings, but convinced that God's providence can turn calamity into opportunity and blessing. His understanding of God (i.e. his dominating God-image) dramatically changed throughout his crisis-filled life. God was no longer merely a far-off Judge, but a caring Father who, in Jesus Christ, met Calvin in a mystical and blissful union through his Holy Spirit.

## The challenge of properly interpreting Calvin and the Reformers' mission in context

As highlighted above, John Calvin had been widely misrepresented by many scholars in the past. Particularly his time in Geneva had been distorted, even with vengeful intent at times. Consequently, others attempted to unmask misrepresented caricatures of Calvin and 'Calvinism' (see Welker, Möller & Weinrich 2011:ix). For many, it would seem paradoxical to mention 'world evangelism' or 'mission' in the same sentence as John Calvin's name. Some modern mission-study scholars are even convinced that Calvin and his 16th century company of pastors lacked any vigorous missionary vision. It seems as if the age-old critique (first noted in the 1880's) of Gustav Warneck, also known as the father of missiology as a theological discipline, still holds sway for them. In Warneck's classic *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions* (1906), he bemoaned the apparent lack of missionary action among the Reformers. He (Warneck quoted in Bosch 2011:249) argued that this is the case 'because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction'.

Is it possible that Warneck's convictions might still be the reason why one word you do not see very often in the indexes of famous works on the life and theology of John Calvin is 'mission' and its corollaries? The recently published *Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Allen & Swain 2020) exhibits a glaring omission of the theme of Calvin's missionary theology. Even the well-acclaimed (and rightly so) *A life of John Calvin*, written by McGrath (1990), lamentably overlooks this core theme. In fact, in a later book, *Christianity's dangerous idea*, published by McGrath (2008:175), he agrees to and affirms Warneck's sentiments: 'This early Protestant disinterest in mission was first noted by Gustav Warneck ... Although his observations have been qualified by subsequent scholarship, they have yet to be convincingly rebutted.' McGrath (2008) expands on this assertion by claiming:

During its formative phase, Protestantism seems to have had little interest in the notions of 'mission' and 'evangelism'. Neither John Calvin nor Martin Luther had any particular concern to reach beyond the borders of Christendom ... (p. 175)

Did researchers such as Warneck and McGrath, representatives of the general theological historical research community, respectively, at the start of the 20th and 21st centuries, adequately deal with Calvin and his missionary theology and work?<sup>1</sup>

More recently, C. Gordon Olson, in his book *What in the World is God Doing?* (1988:111), accuses Calvin and the magisterial Reformers of flagrant oversight of world evangelism: 'When all the argument is done, the embarrassing fact remains: for

1. For a very detailed discussion and balanced critique of Warneck and his peers' analysis of the Reformers' apparent lack of missionary vision, see Medeiros (2017). He convincingly argues that their use and interpretation of the sources did not coherently correspond to the historical reality of the 16th century mission endeavour.



two centuries Protestant leaders did virtually nothing to advance the cause of world evangelization.' Even as recently as 2013, another prominent contemporary missiologist, Sunquist (2013:274), has also followed suit by summarising 16th- and 17th-century 'Reformation Europe' as contexts where 'there was little to no missionary activity in the church', but the question that begs to be answered remains: Was this actually the case?

In trying to answer this question (albeit only briefly), we need to be fully aware of the lurking anachronistic trap of summoning Calvin and other Reformers, in the words of David Bosch (2011:244), before the 'tribunal of the modern missionary movement and finding them guilty for not having subscribed to a definition of mission which did not even exist in their own time'.

Hence Bosch (2011), in following other scholars that engaged critically with Warneck in the 20th century, asks whether it would it not be more appropriate:

... to summons the nineteenth-century missionary enterprise – victim of Humanism, Pietism, and Enlightenment, and child of the modern mind – before the tribunal of the Reformation and then declare it guilty of perverting the missionary idea? (p. 249)

Indeed, if we neglect to do so, we risk to inadvertently assume that the Reformers had no missionary vision. However, as this article aims to re-assert, then we would fail to understand the fundamental thrust of Calvin and his colleagues' theology and ministry.<sup>2</sup>

## The lucid mission-mindedness of Calvin and his company of pastors

### The apparent Great Omission and the doctrine of predestination as particular dilemma

Bosch, in light of his above-mentioned rebuttal of Warneck's anachronistic assertions, concludes that, holistically speaking, the Reformers proposed an 'essentially missionary theology'. However, Bosch (2011:250) also continues by stating that 'very little happened by way of a missionary outreach during the first two centuries after the Reformation'. He also explains the practical hindrances that caused this reality. Others have also suggested a variety of reasons for this so-called 'Great Omission'.

Church historian and Calvin specialist, Scott Manetsch (2017) highlights five of the reasons that have been used by missiology scholars: (1) the Protestant Reformers were preoccupied with promoting and consolidating reform in Old Europe; (2) Protestant churches were struggling for survival in the face of Roman Catholic hostility; (3) Protestant

nations during the age of the Reformation did not have easy access to foreign fields since the Catholic nations of France, Spain and Portugal ruled the ocean; (4) Calvin and other Protestant exegetes believed that Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28 was given specifically to the apostles and not to the church as a whole; and (5) the doctrine of predestination, taught by Calvin and other reformed Christians, reduced human agency and dampened missionary zeal.

However, even a superficial study of Calvin's own writings challenges such oversimplified verdicts. The limited scope of this article does not allow more than a brief focus on the topic of election. Many critics have put the doctrine of predestination (or election) forward as explanation for Calvin's apparent lack of mission-mindedness. However, it has been argued by others that this doctrine was never as central as many 19th-century Reformed theologians asserted (see Holt 2020). The Reformed theological truths of sovereign grace, as taught by Calvinism, including the topic of election, are actually viewed by many Calvin scholars as the doctrines that encourage missionary activity and evangelism (see Beeke 2004:82–83).

Calvin was strongly convinced that, because no human being knew who the elected ones are, we should take it for granted that God wills all humans to be saved. In practice, that conviction should also form the basis of all preaching. The doctrine of predestination pertains solely to the hidden purpose of God and not to the activity of the church which has no ability to distinguish between the elect and those beyond hope of salvation. For him, the core issue at stake was not whether there were two groups of people: one including those going to hell, and the other one, those going to heaven. This issue was rather whether everything depended on us or solely on God. The latter was unambiguously Calvin's conviction (Selderhuis 2009:190).

It is not surprising then that Calvin (2002), quoting Augustine in his *Institutes* (3.23.14) contends:

... because we know not who belongs to the number of the predestinated, or does not belong, our desire ought to be that all may be saved; and hence every person we meet, we will desire to be with us a partaker of peace. (p. 591)

As Calvin's prevailing God-image was not a frugal and stern God of frivolous election, Calvin and his followers could proclaim a merciful Father who has worked kindly in Jesus Christ to redeem all sinners from all over the earth (Jennings 2017:383). In addition, *God opens doors* before the church so that the witness of gospel can reach the ends of the earth in order for God's elect to hear it and respond in faith.

### Bucer and Calvin lead and inspired with missionary zeal

Did John Calvin have a missionary vision and passion for the salvation of those who never had the chance to hear the

<sup>2</sup>It is important to keep in mind throughout this article that the guiding ecclesiology of the 16th-century church in Geneva, mainly structured around preaching, pastoral care and church discipline, naturally did not include a 'missional' focus as it can be understood today. The current, ongoing terminological debate between 'missionary' and 'missional' is also relevant in this regard (see Saayman 2010). Although a detailed discussion thereof exceeds the scope of this article, these issues should be noted as possible focus in future research that might be developed from the article's content.

gospel? Did he use his influence as a religious Reformer to boost world evangelisation beyond the walls of Geneva? Recent scholarship has indicated convincingly that Calvin and his company of pastors were both personally attentive to and actively involved in missionary work. One very significant mentor in Calvin's life, namely Martin Bucer (1491–1551) who was 18 years his senior, played an instrumental role in showing him how to be a missionary pastor.

Bucer is not a figure who enjoyed ample attention of the likes of John Calvin and some of his Protestant peers. He has been described as the castaway amongst the Reformers, deemed as a mere footnote in Reformation history. Some have dubbed him 'the forgotten Reformer', the unlucky one omitted from Geneva's Reformation monument, 'barely remembered by the side of Calvin' (Van Campen 1991:5). Notwithstanding, Bucer was indeed a central figure at a time of crisis – amidst political and social turmoil – in the 16th-century Reformation. At the start of the 16th century, he was very widely known as one of Germany's most active and influential clergymen (Eells 1931:29; Engelsma 1987; Van 't Spijker 2018). He was instrumental in reconciling disparate views between Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and Calvin.<sup>3</sup>

The care and guidance Bucer and Calvin offered as pastors, had an underlying motive, that is, a true missionary zeal. Consequently, Benoit (1974:171) described Calvin's mission-minded pastoral caregiving as follows, '... in his heart he [Calvin] was a warrior for Christ. That is why all of his thoughts are permeated with and made alive by a true missionary zeal' [author's own translation] (see also Schirmacher 2009:10–11). Bucer's passion to evangelise, enlightened his work as caring pastor and forms a balanced whole that can be described as missional pastoral work, that is, doing mission through pastoral care. His advocacy of world evangelisation and focus on the Great Commission was outstanding among the Reformers. For Bucer the expansion of the Gospel beyond Strasbourg and European Christendom was obvious. This global vision made him soar beyond many other Reformation theologians. He has therefore been described as the most missionary minded of the leading Reformers. According to Schirmacher (2013:65–67), Calvin was the only one who shared something of this missionary passion. For both Reformers, daily reformation was mission: proclaiming Christ as King on all terrains of life in a world estranged from God (Bergema 2009:159).

In fact, even amidst the apparent 'Christian Europe' and prior to the so-called Modern Missions Movement, Bucer incessantly encouraged pastors to seek the lost. For him, the apostolic calling to minister foreigners was paramount. Therefore, he emphasised that pastors should do their utmost to lead people into fellowship with Christ.

3. For the purpose of this article, I focus on one striking dimension of the Bucer-Calvin relationship, that is, their shared missionary focus and their inspirational contributions as mission-minded pastors. Their relationship and shared focus gained strength during the three years between September 1538 to September 1541. This period in Strasbourg, under Bucer's mentorship, is also known as Calvin's 'exile' spent in Strasbourg.

In his classic pastoral book, *Concerning the True Care of Souls* (1538), Bucer's strong burden for those entrusted to his care also inspired other pastors not to 'give up lightly on anyone' (Bucer 2009:78). He (Bucer 2009) emphatically insisted that the Great Commission is in no degree compromised by the hiddenness of God's election:

... the fact that all people have been made by God and are God's creatures should therefore be reason enough for us to go to them, seeking with the utmost faithfulness to bring them to eternal life'. (p. XX)

These convictions of Bucer strongly influenced Calvin's own beliefs about predestination.

The last year of Bucer's life was filled with various crises too. After several clashes with the emperor, he was forced to leave Strasbourg (on 06 April 1549) as a refugee – just as he had come. This struck him hard, because he loved, what was then, his German home. However, God opened a door for him to teach as Regius Professor of Theology at Cambridge. He also wrote his well-known *De Regno Christi* [On the Kingdom of Christ], in which he taught Protestant King Edward VI how to make England truly a Christian commonwealth (Eells 1931:40–41).

Moreover, Bucer's missionary vision is also exemplified by the fact that he was not only thinking of the Reformation in Strasbourg, but had a broader vision in mind, which eventually encouraged Calvin to go back. Bucer mentored him wisely to become a pastor, but his ultimate purpose was a missionary one: Calvin had to return and resume his work in Geneva. (Gordon 2009:86). Therefore, Calvin's return to Geneva, backed by Bucer, was itself also a testimony of and a challenge to his own mission-mindedness (Doriani 2017:21–22). The reason being: he had to handle yet another crisis. In July 1540 the Genevan authorities, dissatisfied with the work of their pastors, took steps to get Calvin to return. They were convinced that he was the only one capable of sorting out a precarious and hazardous situation:

Happy in Strasbourg, Calvin really had no desire to return to Geneva. He had openly said to Farel that he preferred 'a hundred deaths to this cross'. After having been disgracefully chased out of his first parish, he could rightfully have rejected in a haughty manner this appeal addressed to him to resume his ministry in Geneva. But Calvin was not the kind of man who held a grudge when the interest of the gospel was involved. (Stauffer 1971:76–77)

## What does Calvin's own writings reveal?

Brief excerpts from Calvin's *Institutes*, prayers, commentaries and other writings that clearly demonstrates that he was convinced that God's desire was for his people to take the gospel to the ends of the earth will now be summarised. He (Calvin 2002) writes:

God, therefore, sets up his kingdom, by humbling the whole world, though in different ways, taming the wantonness of some, and breaking the ungovernable pride of others. We should desire this to be done every day, in order that God may gather

churches to himself from all quarters of the world, may extend and increase their numbers, enrich them with his gifts, establish due order among them. (*Institutes*, 3.20.42)

Calvin believed that responsibility for evangelism and Christian witness belonged not only to trained pastors, but also to lay people in general. Calvin was also convinced that Christians should regularly pray for the advance of Christ's gospel in the world. The pastoral prayer that Calvin included in Geneva's weekly liturgy, reflected this missional concern.

Elsie McKee highlights that the best-known prayers, called 'The Form of Prayers', are the ones Calvin prepared for his own liturgy. In it, Calvin intentionally prays for all people who dwell on earth, for they are made in God's image. He based his prayers on his exegesis and teaching of the Lord's prayer through the lens of 1 Timothy 2:1–2. An excerpt from such a prayer in Calvin's weekly trinitarian liturgy in Geneva includes the following:

... we pray You now, O most gracious God and merciful Father, for all people everywhere. As it is Your will to be acknowledged as the Savior of the whole world, through the redemption wrought by Your Son Jesus Christ, grant that those who are still estranged from the knowledge of Him, being in the darkness and captivity of error and ignorance, may be brought by the illumination of Your Holy Spirit and the preaching of Your gospel to the right way of salvation, which is to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:3). (McKee 2009:128)

Calvin's commentaries also reveal his mission-mindedness. He had a global perspective in a Eurocentric era. In his view, a Christian who is not involved in God's mission is really a contradiction in terms. As he (Calvin 1850) remarks in his *Commentary on Isaiah 2:3*:

... and indeed nothing could be more inconsistent with the nature of faith than that deadness which would lead a man to disregard his brethren, and to keep the light of knowledge choked up within his own breast. (p. 402)

Explicating Isaiah 12:4–5, Calvin (1850) argued that God:

... means that the work of this deliverance will be so excellent that it ought to be proclaimed, not in one corner only, but throughout the whole world... spread abroad to all men ... [*Isaiah*] shows that it is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation. (p. 402)

Commenting on Romans 3:29 Calvin (1849) states:

... but if it be true that God designs to make all the nations of the earth partakers of his mercy, then salvation, and righteousness, which is necessary for salvation, must be extended to all. (p. 150)

In his *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Calvin (1856) claims as follows regarding 1 Timothy 2:4:

... the Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception. (p. 55)

Pondering on Luke 24:47, he (Calvin 1846:377) asserted, 'the grace of redemption brought by [*Christ*] extends alike to all nations'. Under the heading 'Teach all nations', he (Calvin 1846:384) commented on Matthew 28:19, '... the Lord commands the ministers of the gospel to go to a distance, in order to spread the doctrine of salvation in every part of the world'.

Lastly, Calvin's comments (1999) on 2 Corinthians 2:12 are of special significance in relation to the theme of this article, namely, crisis as missional opportunity:

*A door also having been opened to me.* We have spoken of this metaphor ... Its meaning is, that an opportunity of promoting the gospel had presented itself. For as an opportunity of entering is furnished when the door is opened, so the servants of the Lord make advances when an opportunity is presented. The door is shut, when no prospect of usefulness is held out. Now as, on the door being shut, it becomes us to enter upon a new course, rather than by farther efforts to weary ourselves to no purpose by useless labor, so where an opportunity presents itself of edifying, let us consider that by the hand of God a door is opened to us for introducing Christ there, and let us not withhold compliance with so kind an indication from God. (p. 132)

I indicated that Calvin's own writings are richly infused with missiological insights. Moreover, his faith and actions glow with a missionary spirit. South African missiologist, Flip Buys (2013:173–178), for instance identified some basic missiological assumptions in Calvin's theology (mainly derived from primary sources), which includes a trinitarian understanding of the *Missio Dei*; God's sovereignty and man's responsibility not in conflict; God using his people with all their gifts and a holistic kingdom perspective on missions.

Much more can be said, for example about how he used other correspondence such as his thousands of letters – addressing politicians, kings and prisoners and many more – as a means to evangelise. Or how he utilised the Genevan Psalm book as a tool for mission via worship songs. Many scholars have recently re-investigated these topics and the foundations of Calvin's missionary thought (see Haykin & Robinson 2014:27–74; Labuschagne 2009; MacMillan 1989:5–17; Reid 1983:65–74; Stewart 2009; Sunshine 2008:12–22).

### Calvin actively pioneered Geneva as a hub for his company of missionary pastors

In the 1550s the population of Geneva doubled as many (mainly French) refugees streamed in. Initially, the focus of Calvin's missionary zeal was France and, to some degree, the rest of Europe. In 1559, with his encouragement, the government reorganised its educational system by establishing the Geneva Academy (Maag 2020). The scope of Calvin's missionary vision expanded as the academy provided refuge and training for the persecuted refugees. Students gained knowledge in the humanities, ancient biblical languages, Scripture and theology. Furthermore, the aim was to develop their moral character and lives of faith



in order to eventually be sent back to their home countries as missionary pastors to provide key theological leadership.

Geneva indeed became much more than a safe haven for religious refugees. It was now a missional training centre, and another direct outflow of Calvin's missionary zeal and his ability to realise the enormous potential in the crisis situation for preparing and sending out missionary pastors and evangelists. Calvin was unable to keep up with the high demand for pastors:

They come from everywhere to seek pastors from us ... We would be glad to fulfill their desires, but we have completely run out. A long time ago already, we took from the workplaces the last man who had even the least bit of literary and theological training (quoted in Selderhuis 2009:242).

Calvin also committed himself to them for life, assessing, counselling, corresponding with and praying for the church planters he sent. Their well-being was his primary concern and he pro-actively gave them his best pastoral support, which was crucial considering the dangers which evangelists faced in France at that time (McKay 2008:84–86).

Eventually, under Calvin's influence, around 220 Reformed pastors were sent secretly into France during an extremely perilous era to plant churches and evangelise the towns and villages of the French kingdom. Many of these men were arrested and died violently (beheaded or burned at a wooden stake) as Protestant martyrs. 'Yet with bravery and a sense of mission they were willing to face such dangers to reform the Church of Christ in France' (Kingdon 2007:127). This is another example of how a crisis became an opportunity for the gospel to be spread. The company of pastors' missionary campaign succeeded with enormous fruitful effect. Estimates are that around 1240 Protestant churches were planted in Catholic France between 1555 and 1570 – many of them by missionary pastors sent from Geneva (some scholars give much higher estimates). Later, the church planting extended to Hungary, Poland, Italy, the Netherlands and the free Imperial city-states in the Rhineland (Hendrix 2004:xvii; Kingdon 2007:79–90; Manetsch 2017). No wonder Calhoun (1979:27) calls the mission endeavour from Geneva a 'thrilling chapter in the history of missions'.

However, this colossal venture was not the last chapter. Calvin was also involved in one overseas missionary enterprise: the Huguenot mission (trained in Geneva) to Brazil. Two French naval officers, Gaspard de Coligny and Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, began a French settlement in the 'New World' at the end of 1555. They were affiliated to Reformed beliefs which led Villegagnon to request the church in Geneva for missionary pastors to be sent. Calvin was directly involved in selecting 14 people (in 1556) – pastors and craftsmen – who accompanied the expedition of around 400 men who sailed for Brazil. This time, however, the *open door was closed* because of Villegagnon's dissatisfaction with Calvin and the Reformers caused by a dispute over Holy Communion. He executed three Calvinists (09 February

1558) and many others escaped in fear. Eventually, the Portuguese attacked and destroyed the rest of the settlement in 1560 (Gordon 1984:12–18). However, a few Protestants, including Jean de Léry, temporarily hid among the natives and later (1578) succeeded in returning to Europe. When he came back, he wrote:

... the Church in Geneva having received these letters and heard this news, first of all gave thanks to God for magnifying the kingdom of Christ in such a distant country, even in such a strange land, and amid a nation which was evidently quite ignorant of the true God. (Zorn 2011:182)

The missionary expedition was not a total failure after all ...

## Conclusion

I conclude with basic reflections on insights from the 16th century for God's mission today, as the crises we now face, give us the opportunity afresh of truly being the church. In this article, I argued that insights gleaned from John Calvin and his colleagues' missionary passion are relevant to the identity and practices of contemporary missional churches (from a Reformed background or otherwise). I did this by first exploring Calvin's manifold personal crises in the 16th-century context and how this changed his life and faith. Subsequently, I engaged with some missiologists and historians to ascertain how we can properly interpret Calvin and the Reformers' missionary vision without drawing oversimplified, anachronistic conclusions. I also challenged the widespread misrepresentations that downplay the Reformers' missionary thrust, although it is made clear by their theology and ministry. Thereafter, I explicated the lucid mission-mindedness of Calvin and his company of pastors with specific reference to Martin Bucer's contribution.

The above-mentioned descriptions give us a clear picture of the missionary hearts of Bucer and Calvin, and indicates that the Reformers' ideas of world evangelisation, albeit in an embryo stage in a Eurocentric era of Christianity, was positive and pro-active. Ever since, Calvinism has been proven 'an eminent incentive to all missionary enterprises, domestic and foreign' (Warfield 2001 [1973]:447). Some might ask: Why then was there no systematic theology of mission in their writings? Perhaps precisely because mission was such an integrated core of all their ministries in Geneva and Strasbourg, which later became powerful agencies in global mission.

One significant aspect that was woven throughout Calvin's and Bucer's life and ministry was the fact that *God opened doors* before them through a variety of crisis situations, which, in turn, afforded them *great opportunities* to spread the gospel wider in order for God's elect to hear it and respond in faith. In other words, Bucer's and Calvin's role and identity as missionary pastors – expanding mission through pastoral care – are significant features that came to the fore in this article. They focused on discerning God at work in the lives of people through Christ and his Holy Spirit, whilst seldom neglecting opportunities to witness to the gospel. How can

their actions inspire us to, for instance, develop a relevant and authentic missional pastoral theology today, albeit in a radically different time and space?

The COVID-19 pandemic and its deep impact present the global church with an opportunity to recommit itself to its essential missionary (or, for many, missional) calling. Existential realities such as suffering, despair and vulnerability are exacerbated by this crisis, and challenge us to become more resilient in faith and mutual care in congregational networks. Is it not urgently important for us to discern how pastoral theology can be shaped by a missionary understanding of the church so that pastoral care does not stop at building up believers, but also serves the emission of our missional calling (see Goheen 2018)? This is an important theme identified for future research.

In God's good providence, the disruption of COVID-19 and similar crises might become ways in which congregations are helped to move away from the expectation of missional reformation from strategic planning or endless new models in a post-Christian and post-Christendom context. Instead, our expectation for renewal and reform can only find its fulfilment in the triune God. Therefore, we need to inform all our strategies by constructive missional theology, replacing our performance-driven aspirations to save the congregation (Guder 2015).

Bucer's and Calvin's hands-on and resilient missionary ministries inspire us in an age of rising natural disasters and rapid migration. Our time is one in which pre-existing crises such as escalating nationalism, refugee crises and a new global diaspora are all amplified by the COVID-19 crisis. We are challenged to re-assess whether our missional interventions actually reach beyond congregational boundaries. Are we inviting all into the fellowship of Christ and not giving up lightly on anyone or in any circumstance? By effectively witnessing to foreigners in our midst, albeit digitally because of COVID-19 restrictions, God can open doors of opportunity for mission work in other parts of the world where we normally would not be welcome. How should we envision the role of equipping pastors for the apostolate nature of discipleship?

We can also learn from Bucer and Calvin about the fundamental indivisibility of the church and mission or, as Bosch (2011:381) phrases it, that 'a church without mission or a mission without the church are both contradictions'. Darrell Guder, pioneer of the contemporary Missional Church Movement, contends that our current missional challenge is indeed 'a crisis of faith and spirit, and it will be met only through conversion, the continuing conversion of the Church' (Guder 2000:150).

Our ministries have no need to emulate the Reformers' practices because of the enormous contextual gaps between them and us. However, we could gain much from a fresh interpretation of their missionary zeal, whilst we grapple

with being missional churches in our own contexts. By doing so, we partake in the continual history of the Reformation. Churches from a Reformed background in particular are challenged to perpetually reform (*semper reformanda*) by critically reclaiming our tradition and moulding our future identity from the roots up, crisis and all.

In its theology and actual mission practice, the Reformed tradition continues to establish its deep-rooted missional momentum as part of the worldwide Christian movement. Although Calvin or his colleagues did not create a complete theology of mission, it has been made very clear that their whole theology and Christian life had a missionary core. Their contributions to God's mission have been unfolding before the world for nearly 500 years. The Reformers clearly remind us: It is God's mission. He opens a door, albeit via crises, and we are merely called to faithfully participate.

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