John Calvin and Missions:

A Historical Study

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Introduction
There is a long-standing tradition that claims that Calvin and the early Protestant movement took no interest in missions. Gustav Warneck wrote early in this century, “We miss in the Reformers not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions… [in part] because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction.”[1] Warneck went on to state that Calvin claimed that the Church had no duty to send out missionaries.[2] This misunderstanding has continued even into the present day. Ralph D. Winter, for instance, writes that the Reformers “did not even talk of mission outreach.”[3] He claims that the Protestant missionary movement can be divided into three eras: the first beginning in 1792 with William Carey, the second beginning 1865 with Hudson Taylor, and the third beginning in 1934 with Cameron Townsend and Donald McGavran. Winter describes missionary efforts prior to 1792 by saying, “our Protestant tradition plugged along for over 250 years minding its own business and its own blessing (like Israel of old).”[4]

While these charges may be brought against many churches in the Protestant tradition, and even against some Calvinistic churches, it is simply untrue that John Calvin took no interest in missions. In fact, Calvin sent hundreds of missionaries to France, the rest of Europe, and even to the New World. The following discussion, therefore, will not only demonstrate that John Calvin had a coherent theology of missions, but will provide a summary of how his theology took action in his missionary endeavors throughout the world.

Calvin’s Theology of Missions
Calvin never wrote a systematic treatment of his theology of missions. However, his Institutes, commentaries, and letters contain many references to his theology of missions and his missionary spirit. An accurate description of his theology of missions can be reconstructed from these statements made by Calvin in his writings. The following will provide a summary of his theology of missions as well as answers to common objections to his theology as they relate to missions.

A Positive Statement
The basis for Christian missions, according to Calvin, is the present reign of Jesus Christ. In his commentaries on the Psalms and prophets, it is clear that Calvin considered the kingdom of
David to be a shadow of the greater Kingdom to come. For instance, commenting on Isaiah 2:4, Calvin writes, “the difference between the kingdom of David, which was but a shadow, and this other Kingdom,” is that “by the coming of Christ, [God] began to reign… in the person of his only-begotten Son.”[5] Commenting on Psalm 22:28, Calvin writes, “This passage, I have no doubt, agrees with many other prophecies which represent the throne of God as erected, on which Christ may sit to superintend and govern the world.”[6] This present reign of God through Christ is presupposed throughout his writings when he speaks of the basis for world missions.

One important dynamic that takes effect in this new Kingdom is the breakdown of the distinction between Jew and Gentile. Calvin frequently makes use of Ephesians 2:14 to insist that the partition-wall between Jew and Gentile has been broken down and the gospel has been promulgated, so that “we [both Jew and Gentile] have been gathered together into the body of the Church, and Christ’s power is put forth to uphold and defend us.”[7] Since Christ’s rule extends over not only Jews, but over the whole world, Gentiles are called along with Jews into His Kingdom.[8] It is the inclusion of Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel that allows the gospel of the Jewish Messiah to be proclaimed to Gentiles throughout the world.

Christ’s task while ruling over the earth from heaven is to subdue the earth to Himself. This happens in two ways. First, the reprobate who refuse to submit to Christ’s rule will “assail” the kingdom of Christ “from time to time until the end of the world,” at which time they will be laid prostrate at His feet.[9] Second, the elect are “brought to yield a willing obedience to Him,” being subdued and humbled by Him. After the last day these will be made “partakers with Him in glory.”[10] By these two methods the kingdom will be extended throughout the world. At no time can the progress of this kingdom be hindered. Commenting on Isaiah 2:2, Calvin writes that there will be “uninterrupted progress” in the spread of His kingdom “until he appears a second time for our salvation.”[11] The kingdom of Christ, the “invincible Kingdom,” will be “vastly extended” because God makes “his scepter stretch far and wide.”[12] Throughout the Church age, according to Calvin, Christ’s kingdom is being extended throughout the world.

The means by which Christ’s kingdom is spread on earth is through the preaching of the gospel to the nations. Calvin writes, “There is no other way of raising up the church of God than by the light of the word, in which God himself, by his own voice, points out the way of salvation. Until the truth shines, men cannot be united together, so as to form a true church.”[13] Calvin insisted that Christians bear the responsibility to spread the gospel. He writes, “for it is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation… the work is such as ought not to be concealed in a corner, but to be everywhere proclaimed.”[14] While God could have used other means, He chose to “employ the agency of men” through the preaching of the gospel.[15]
Calvin’s theology of missions is thus God-centered and Christ-centered, focusing on the glory of God in Christ as well as the duty of man. All of life was to be lived for the glory of God. While the Catholic Church used meritorious works and asceticism as tools of motivation for missions, Protestants would not use this type of motivation.[16] For Calvin, the motivating factor for world missions was the glory of God. When the gospel is proclaimed and accepted among the nations, God is worshipped and glorified. This is the chief end of man. Charles Chaney writes of him, “The fact that the glory of God was the prime motive in early Protestant missions and that it has played such a vital part in later missionary thought and activity can be traced directly to Calvin’s theology.”[17]

Charges against Calvin’s Theology of Missions

There have been many who say that Calvin’s theology was a hindrance to missions throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Two charges are usually given against Calvin’s theology of mission. These are his understanding of the Great Commission and his doctrine of predestination. However, both these charges reflect a poor understanding of Calvin’s theology.

The Great Commission

Some have objected to Calvin’s understanding of missions by claiming that Calvin believed that the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) was binding only on the first century apostles, making missions unnecessary for future generations.[18] It is true that Calvin interpreted the Great Commission as referring to the apostolic ministry.[19] However, his reasoning for interpreting the Great Commission in this way was not to de-emphasize the necessity of missions in the present time. He was fighting a different battle—namely, the battle against the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession. Calvin intended to show that the Apostolate was a temporary munus extraordinarium that ceased after the twelve apostles. The Great Commission was brought into this discussion to argue against Catholicism, not missionary activity.[20]

Calvin never expressed the idea that the apostles fulfilled the missionary command such that missionary activity is no longer necessary. He only saw the beginning of the spread of the gospel to all nations being fulfilled by the apostles.[21] Calvin wrote of the apostolic ministry, “Christ, we know, penetrated with amazing speed, from the east to west, like the lightning’s flash, in order to bring into the Church the Gentiles from all parts of the world.”[22] Yet Calvin also wrote of the necessity of missionary activity in the present time. For instance, commenting on Matthew 24:19, he wrote, “the Lord commands the ministers of the gospel to go a distance, in order to spread the doctrine of salvation in every part of the world.”[23] Calvin made similar statements in his comments on Isaiah 12:5; 45:23; Matt. 24:14; and 2 Cor. 2:12. While there were some after Calvin who taught that the missionary mandate had been fulfilled,[24] this view cannot be attributed to Calvin himself.

Predestination
It has been objected that if Calvin’s doctrine of predestination is true, then there is no reason to be involved in missions, for all the elect will surely be saved and all the reprobate will surely be eternally damned. Ruth Tucker, for instance, writes in her history of Christian missions that the doctrine of predestination taught by Calvinists “made missions extraneous if God had already chosen those he would save.”[25] However, according to Calvin, this objection forgets the doctrine of the preached word. Calvin insisted that God uses the preaching of the gospel by men to bring people to faith. Calvin writes,

although he is able to accomplish the secret work of his holy Spirit without any means or assistance, he has nevertheless ordained outward preaching, to use it as it were as a means. But to make such a means effective and fruitful he inscribes in our hearts with his own finger those very words which he speaks in our ears by the mouth of a human being.[26]

Not only has God ordained the preaching of the gospel as a means of salvation, it is the only means of salvation. Calvin writes, “God cannot be called upon by any except those who have learned of his mercy from the gospel.”[27]

Furthermore, Calvin insisted that the number of the elect is unknown. Therefore, the gospel ought to be freely proclaimed to everyone. Quoting Augustine, Calvin writes, “For as we know not who belongs to the number of the predestined or who does not belong, we ought to be so minded as to wish that all men be saved.”[28] In this way, the preaching of the gospel to the nations is not hindered, but encouraged. The will of man is captive to Satan’s will (2 Tim. 2:25-26), such that it is impossible for anyone to will his own salvation. However, the preacher knows that there are elect who will be saved at the preaching of the gospel through the inward work of the Holy Spirit.[29] Therefore, the preacher can proclaim the gospel with confidence that those elected to eternal life will heed the call.

Calvin’s Missionary Endeavors
Charles Edwards was certainly correct when he stated that “The Reformation was a missionary movement on a grand, international scale.”[30] As the Reformation spread throughout Europe, missionary activity was taking place. The sacramentalism of Catholicism gave way to a truer Christianity based on sola scriptura, sola fide, and sola gratia. In fact, even the Catholic understanding of the gospel likely did not reach many in the uneducated classes. The Scriptures were written and the mass was conducted in Latin. Many of those who were unable to understand Latin likely never had any gospel preached to them in an understandable manner. As the reformation spread throughout Europe, the Bible was translated into common tongues and church services were understandable to the masses. In all likelihood, unreached peoples in Europe were reached with the gospel through the reformation. The Reformers continually had to fight for their very survival, fighting to establish their own identity over their Roman Catholic
adversaries.[31] Yet even with this opposition, Calvin was able to make an extraordinary effort to evangelize France, the rest of Europe, and even the New World.

France
Calvin had an intense passion for the conversion of France to the Reformed faith. In 1553, Calvin began sending missionaries to France. Most of these missionaries had come to Geneva as refugees from France while fleeing persecution. Yet after being trained by Calvin in theology, moral character, and preaching, he sent them back to plant churches in France. These efforts by Calvin had tremendous success. In 1555, there were five Reformed churches in France. In 1559, there were almost 100. In 1562, the number had reached 2,150.[32] The total membership of these churches in 1562 is estimated at three million (out of a total population in France of about 20 million).[33]

When requests for new ministers were received in Geneva from France, Calvin did his best to send pastors to fill those pulpits. The Register of the Company of Pastors mentions 88 men who were sent from Geneva between 1555 and 1562.[34] However, this was not a complete list. Some names were changed and even omitted to protect them from possible religious persecution. Also, before 1555 and after 1562, it was deemed unwise to keep records for fear of persecution. Yet it has been determined from other sources that no less than 142 missionaries were sent from Geneva (a city of 20,000) in 1561 alone.[35] The picture that remains is that an astounding number of missionaries were sent out from Geneva under Calvin’s influence. Fred Klooster even writes, “the mission activity that emanated from Geneva under Calvin’s inspiration was itself of monumental proportions. It was perhaps the greatest home missions project that history has yet seen since the time of the apostles.”[36]

So successful was this church planting effort that it drew the attention of the king of France. In 1561 Charles IX, the new king of France, sent a letter to the Council of Geneva. The letter claimed that preachers sent from Geneva were causing “seditions and dissensions which had been disturbing his reign.”[37] The king then asked that the pastors be recalled from France in order to maintain peace in the land. Calvin replied to the king saying that “we have never attempted to send persons into your kingdom as your majesty has been told…; so that it will be found that no one, with our knowledge and permission, has ever gone from here to preach except a single individual who was asked of us for the city of London.” He admits that some people had come to them, but they had simply instructed them “to exercise their gifts wherever they should go for the advancement of the gospel.”[38]

The result of Calvin’s extraordinary efforts to evangelize France was that a Protestant church was formed by peaceful means. Williston Walker writes that “A great national Church, for the first time in Reformation history, was created independent of a hostile State; and the work was one for which Calvin had given the model, the inspiration, and the training.”[39] Blood was spilt
in France over the Protestant cause. However, after the massacre at Vassy and the peace of Amboise in 1563, Calvin wrote, “I would always counsel that arms be laid aside, and that we all perish rather than enter again on the confusions that have been witnessed.”[40]

His desire to bring reformation to France through peaceful means is also evident in his correspondence with kings Francis I and Henry II. In 1536, three years after his conversion, Calvin addressed his first edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion to king Francis I. In this address, he sought the conversion of the king to the Protestant faith.[41] In 1557, Calvin wrote to king Henry II explaining the faith of the French Reformed churches. In this letter he gave the king of France a brief statement of faith in order to encourage the king “to have compassion on those who seek but to serve God in simplicity, while they loyally acquit themselves of their duty towards you.”[42]

The Rest of Europe
Geneva: Refugee Center and Missionary Center
Since about 1542, Calvin’s Geneva became a refugee center. Protestants from all over Europe, including the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Italy, came to Geneva for refuge from religious persecution. By 1555, the population of Geneva doubled. Calvin himself was pleased to take in these refugees, though at times it was extremely difficult to accommodate them. Calvin wrote in a letter to Farel dated 1551, “I am, meanwhile, much preoccupied with the foreigners who daily pass through this place in great numbers, or who have come here to live… Should you pay us a visit next autumn, you will find our city considerably increased—a pleasing spectacle to me, if they do not overwhelm me with their visits.”[43]

Yet Calvin’s Geneva can be considered not only a refugee center, but a missionary center for the propagating of the gospel and the establishment of Reformed churches throughout Europe. People who came from all over Europe were trained as missionaries and sent back out as ministers of the gospel. Laman writes that

Through the coming and going of these refugees, and through the evangelical writings from the printing presses of Geneva and elsewhere in Latin, French, English, and Dutch, the Reformed faith was exported widely, even to Poland and Hungary. By correspondence, Calvin encouraged, guided, and dialogued with this diaspora of evangelical Christians witnessing under persecution.[44]

It is impossible, given the scope of this paper, to explore in detail the results of Calvin’s endeavors throughout Europe. The following, therefore, will simply bring to light some of the highlights of Calvin’s involvement, focusing only on the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Poland, and Hungary.
The Netherlands
In 1544, Calvin sent the first Reformed missionary to the Netherlands. Pierre Brully worked to establish a Reformed church there, but was martyred after only three months.[45] Lutherans and Anabaptists had seen some converts in the 1520’s and 30’s, but the Calvinists carried the day, possibly because of the Calvinistic form of church government and discipline.[46] Guy de Bray, who had met with Calvin in Frankfort in 1556, wrote the so-called Belgic Confession in 1559. This confession was printed in 1561 in Geneva.[47] This confession has become the foundation for the Reformed Church of Holland.

The Netherlands produced missionaries of their own, largely through the writings of Hadrianus Saravia (1531-1613). He undertook the task of developing a reformed perspective on missiology, though he was influenced in many ways by the Anglican system of church government. In 1590, he wrote a treatise entitled, On the Various Levels of Ministers of the Gospel as They have been Instituted by the Lord, which argued against the view that the Great Commission ended with the apostolic age. Saravia’s writings influenced later Dutch missionaries in India such as Justus Heurnius (1587-1651). Missionaries were sent to India from the Netherlands nearly two hundred years before Carey wrote his Enquiry in 1792.[48] Saravia’s work also influenced the early Puritans in America such as John Eliot, who ministered to the American Indians in New England during the seventeenth century.[49]

England
Calvin had gained some influence in England during the reign of Edward VI, as evidenced by his letters to Cramner.[50] Acceptance of Calvin’s theology increased throughout Edward’s reign. However, it was through Calvin’s ministry to the Marian exiles in Geneva that Calvinism took hold in England.[51] Large numbers of exiles were admitted in Geneva during the reign of Mary. At least 50 exiles were received on one day in 1557. John Knox, a devout disciple of Calvin, who was later to return to Scotland in 1559, pastored these refugees. During the reign of Elizabeth, these Marian exiles returned to England with their Calvinistic doctrine. The eventual result was the formation of the Puritan party and the drafting of the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1646.[52]

During the reign of Edward VI, London also became a refugee center. In 1550, John à Lasco (or Jan Laski), a Polish nobleman and friend of Calvin, was installed pastor over a “foreigners’ church” of French and German exiles in London. A Lasco’s church was modeled after Calvin’s ordinances for Geneva, though with some modifications. Calvin kept in regular contact with a Lasco and the London church, which existed until disbanded by Mary I. Potter and Greengrass write that after the church was disbanded, a Lasco and other members “were to prove important catalysts for Swiss reform elsewhere in Europe.”[53] Many of these exiles made it to Frankfurt and formed a congregation there in 1554. A Lasco went to Norway and Emden before arriving in Frankfurt to once again pastor the “foreigners’ church” there.[54]
In 1544, a Lasco was in Emden, where he was superintendent of churches in East Friesland. A Lasco met with Simon Menno with the purpose of converting Menno and his followers to the Reformed faith. One writer states,

The discussion was held on Jan. 28-31, 1544, when the articles pertaining to the Incarnation, baptism, original sin, justification, and the call of ministers were discussed. Although the two men did not agree concerning all articles, Menno and his followers were dismissed by a Lasco in a friendly manner. Menno had promised to present a written confession regarding the Incarnation, and he now wrote… A brief and clear confession and scriptural declaration concerning the Incarnation.[55]

Although a Lasco later published this confession “without Menno's knowledge or consent,” this exchange demonstrates a Lasco’s desire to convert even the Radical reformers to the Protestant cause without resorting to violence. [56]

Scotland

Calvin aided in bringing the reformation to Scotland through the ministry of John Knox. Knox had fled England after Mary ascended to the throne and arrived in Geneva in 1554. He returned to Scotland in 1555 in a failed attempt to bring reform, and shortly returned to Geneva.[57] In 1556, he began to pastor the English fugitive congregation in Geneva. Knox was sent back to Scotland in 1559 and successfully established Protestantism in that country. In 1560, the Scottish parliament denounced papal authority and drafted the First Confession of Faith, which was thoroughly Calvinistic in orientation. The Kirk of Scotland was then fashioned after the Calvinistic model found in the Institutes and in the practice of the French Reformed churches.[58]

While Calvin was generally in approval of John Knox and his ministry, there were some tensions. In 1558, while Knox was still in Geneva, he published a pamphlet without Calvin’s knowledge entitled The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women. This pamphlet was written in response to Mary’s reign and argued that women rulers were against God’s law. Calvin banned the sale of the book in Geneva. When Elizabeth I became queen later in 1558, Calvin dedicated his commentary on Isaiah to her in an attempt to repair the damaged relationship between Geneva and England. However, the damage was done and in 1566 Beza stated that Elizabeth’s hostility toward Calvinism was as a result of this incident. After Knox returned to Scotland, Calvin continued to be concerned about Knox’s abrasive and uncompromising nature. Nevertheless, there appears to have been a good relationship between the two reformers. Yet Calvin’s concern about Knox demonstrates his own missionary mindset. Calvin wanted to bring reform to England and Scotland in full submission to the proper authorities.[59]
Poland
Calvin had much success early on in the evangelization of Poland. By 1545, Calvinism was spreading widely among the nobility of Poland. King Sigismund Augustus of Poland himself was a tolerant, “enlightened” Catholic who even took a Protestant wife.[60] Calvin dedicated his commentary on Hebrews to him in 1549. He wrote, “Your kingdom is extensive and renowned, and abounds in many excellencies; but its happiness will then only be solid when it adopts Christ as its chief ruler and governor.”[61] Calvin again wrote him on Christmas Eve 1555 and stated that “in Poland true religion has already begun to dawn on the darkness of the Popery… I whom the King of kings has appointed a preacher of the gospel, and a minister of his church, call upon your majesty in his name, to make this work above all others your special care.”[62] In effect, Calvin preached the gospel to the king of Poland and asked him to encourage the work of the Reformation there.

While Calvin and Sigismund Augustus remained on good terms, the king never agreed to undertake a national Reformation. Nevertheless, John à Lasco (Jan Laski) returned to Poland in 1557, where he spent the last three to four years of his life “in an evangelical campaign to create a proper evangelical Church in Poland.[63] Lasco was the leading reformer in Poland. He was originally a priest and friend of Erasmus before undertaking the task of furthering the Reformation in several countries, including England and Germany. After his return, he busied himself “preaching, holding synods, stimulating the translation of the Bible into Polish, and seeking to bring the varieties of Protestantism into one ecclesiastical structure.”[64]

In many ways, Lasco was a model Protestant leader. Kenneth Scott Latourette writes that he “was an irenic soul who exerted himself in behalf of accord among the Protestants.”[65] Calvin viewed him with similar regard. He wrote to John Utenhoven, also laboring in Poland, “I am fully convinced he will labour faithfully and strenuously in extending the kingdom of Christ.”[66] While Calvin’s and Lasco’s efforts had initial success, it did not last long past Calvin’s death. Conflicts with Lutherans, Anti-Trinitarians, and Jesuits caused Calvinism to decline and it never achieved a lasting foothold in Poland.[67]

Hungary
The stage for reformation in Hungary was set at least in part by three factors. First, the ministry and martyrdom of John Hus (1373-1415), whose teachings were widely spread in Hungary in the 15th century,[68] incited sympathy for the protestant cause. Second, 1541, the entire New Testament was translated into the Hungarian language. Third, in 1536, King Soliman the Magnificent threatened Hungary. In 1526, King Louis went to meet him at Mohácz with only 27,000 men—a mere fraction of the Turkish army. The result was a massacre, and king Louis fled the country, leaving a power vacuum in Hungary. James Wylie continues the story:
Two candidates now contested the scepter of Hungary — John Zapolya, the unpatriotic grandee who saw his king march to death, but sat still in his castle, and the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria. Both caused themselves to be crowned, and hence arose a civil war, which, complicated with occasional appearances of Soliman upon the scene, occupied the two rivals for years, and left them no leisure to carry out the persecuting edicts. In the midst of these troubles Protestantism made rapid progress. Peter Perenyi, a powerful noble, embraced the Gospel, with his two sons. Many other magnates followed his example, and settled Protestant ministers upon their domains, built churches, planted schools, and sent their sons to study at Wittemberg. The greater number of the towns of Hungary embraced the Reformation.[69]

Whatever the reasons, by the 1550’s, Calvinism was becoming established in Hungary. In 1557 and 1558 a synod was held which resulted in the Hungarian Confession, exhibiting a distinct Calvinistic theology. In 1567, at the Synod of Debrecen, the Hungarian Reformed Church adopted the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession.[70] Calvinism has survived in Hungary despite much persecution, though during the seventeenth century the Counter Reformation reclaimed many converts to the Catholic faith. However, at the turn of this century, two-thirds of the evangelical churches of Hungary were Calvinistic in origin.[71] Of the nearly 2.6 million people associated with Christian denominations in Hungary today (population 10.5 million), approximately 2 million are affiliated with the Reformed Church.[72]

Overseas Missions in Brazil

Protestants were greatly hindered in any attempt to bring the gospel overseas. Prior to 1588 (when the Spanish Armada was defeated) the Spanish and the Portuguese controlled the seaways.[73] The Pope had divided the New World between them. The French defied the Pope in this matter and sent out ships to the New World themselves.[74] Since these countries were Catholic, they did not permit Protestant missionaries to sail overseas with the gospel. As Gordon Laman has noted, a kind of “religious imperialism” had joined with the “commercial and political imperialism” of the Spain and Portugal.[75] Therefore, it was astonishing that Calvin was able to send missionaries to Brazil.

Nicolas Durand, who received the title sieur de Villegagnon from his father, was a fellow student with John Calvin in Paris. However, Villegagnon joined the military and became Knight of Malta. He was later appointed Vice-admiral of Brittany. After a quarrel with a governor, he decided to start a colonial expedition in Brazil. Villegagnon sought the aid of the Coligny, the Grand Admiral of France, who was a supporter and protector of the Reformed Church. Villegagnon told him that he desired to start a colony that would offer protection for Protestants being persecuted in France. This convinced Coligny and Coligny in turn convinced Henry II to grant ships towards the expedition.[76]
On November 10, 1555, Villegagnon set sail and after four months, they landed in Rio de Janeiro. After his arrival in Brazil, he sent word back to Coligny asking for reinforcements and for ministers to evangelize the Tupinamba Indians. Coligny was all too happy to oblige his request. He wrote Calvin about the matter, and according to Baez-Camargo, Calvin “saw a wonderful door opening here for the extension of the Geneva Church, and so he took steps at once to organize a missionary force.”[77] Two pastors and eleven laymen volunteered for the mission. They left Geneva in September 1556 and landed in Fort Coligny (in Rio de Janeiro) in March 1557.[78]

The Genevan missionaries were received with gladness. Pierre Richier and Guillaume Chartier, the two pastors, began to organize the church in Fort Coligny. On March 21, 1557, they held their first communion service. Villegagnon appeared to be a model Protestant leader. However, things soon began to change. Villegagnon began to interfere with the pastors in matters of church discipline and even on “matters of faith.” He began to demand that baptism and the Lord’s Supper be administered in a similar fashion to Catholic teachings. To rectify this situation, both sides agreed to send Chartier back to Geneva to discuss the matter and Villegagnon said he would abide by what Calvin said on the matter. However, as soon as Chartier left, Villegagnon began to call Calvin a heretic. He also began to punish the Genevan missionaries by over working them in the construction of the fort and not giving them adequate food. At this point, Richier confronted Villegagnon face to face and told him that the Geneva missionaries would return to Geneva on the next ship.[79]

In January 1558, the missionaries set sail to return home. Yet the ship began to leak, so five of the Geneva men decided to return to the mission. Villegagnon initially welcomed them back, but then grew suspicious. He demanded a statement of faith from the Genevan Calvinists. When he received the statement, he had three out of the five men strangled and thrown into the ocean (the other two were spared because Villegagnon was in need of a tailor and a cutler). Villegagnon later returned to France for reinforcements, and in 1560, the Portuguese attacked and destroyed the fort, and the French colony was ended.[80]

From all practical standpoints, the mission to Brazil was a failure. Yet during the short time the Genevan missionaries were in Brazil, attempts were made to evangelize the Indians. Richier was discouraged by the nature of the Indian cannibals. He saw them as “crassly stupid” and “incapable of distinguishing good from evil.” He was also discouraged by the greatness of the language barrier. Nevertheless, he wrote Calvin, “Since where the Most High has given us this task, we expect this Edom to become a future possession for Christ.”[81] In a more optimistic moment, Richier recognized the opportunity he had in evangelizing these Indians and wrote to Calvin that they are “like a tabula rasa easy to paint on.”[82] So Richier never gave up his desire for the conversion of these Indians.
One of the laymen, a theological student named Jean de Léry, was less pessimistic. He spent time in their villages and took notes on their religious beliefs and customs. He even found some good traits among them. At one time he wrote that “if we had been able to remain in that country for a longer time, we would have drawn and won over some of them to Christ.”[83] Léry gave an example of a time when he was crossing the jungle with three Indian friends. Compelled by the beauty of his surroundings, Léry began to sing Psalm 104, “Bless the Lord, O my Soul.” The Indians asked him to explain the song. Léry did not know the Indian dialect very well, but proceeded to explain the song and the gospel in the span of a half an hour. The Indians were pleased with what they heard and presented him with an aguti (a kind of rabbit-sized rodent) as a gift.[84]

Therefore, while there was never a single Indian convert from the Brazil mission, the reason was more for lack of time than for lack of effort. Calvin took the only opportunity he had to start a mission in the New World. Though the mission failed, this effort demonstrates Calvin’s desire to see Christ’s kingdom extended to every nation on earth. Calvin never had another opportunity to send out more missionaries. It would be the New England Puritans of the seventeenth century who would carry on the work begun by Calvin.

Conclusion
John Calvin never presented a systematic theology of missions in his writings. However, it has been shown not only that a coherent theology of missions can be reconstructed from his writings, but that Calvin considered Geneva to be a “missionary center” for the evangelization of France, the rest of Europe, and even the New World. Perhaps the reason why no systematic theology of missions can be found in his writings is because missions was central to his ministry in Geneva. Missions was not a “section” of his systematic theology, it was central to what he was trying to accomplish in his ministry. Does Calvin fit a twentieth century definition of what a missionary should be like? Probably not, but neither did William Carey or Hudson Taylor. The fact remains that Calvin’s theology and missionary efforts constitute a major step forward in protestant missiology.

After discussing Calvin’s missionary endeavors and highlighting the efforts of the Puritans in New England and the Dutch missionaries in the Orient (not to mention the Moravian missions), it should be evident that a fourth era of missionary activity should be added to Winter’s scheme, beginning in 1544 when John Calvin sent his first missionaries to the Netherlands. While this era may seem small when compared to the movement begun by William Carey (a Calvinist), it still deserves its proper recognition in any history of Protestant missions.

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[7] Commentary on Ps. 110:2, in Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 6, Psalms 93-150, 301; see also his commentaries on Isaiah 45:22, Matthew 24:19, and Acts 8:1.
[10] Ibid., 300.


[21] Ibid., 179.


[24] For instance, Beza taught that the apostles had taken the gospel even to America. See J. van den Berg, “Calvin’s Missionary Message,” 179.


[27] See John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.20.12. See also 3:20.1; 3.20.11.


[32] Ibid., 59.


[34] Preface to Robert M. Kingdon, Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France.


[40] Ibid., 387
[44] Ibid., 59.
[47] Ibid. See also Williston Walker, John Calvin, 388.
[48] Carey’s writing was probably heavily influenced by the writings of Justus Heurnius. See Ibid., 63.
[51] Ibid., 389-90.
[52] Ibid., 390-91.
[54] Ibid., 138. See also Williston Walker, John Calvin, 393.
[56] Ibid. At the same time, it should be noted that a Lasco believed Menno’s theology was misleading many from the true faith and sought to hinder its progress. In 1554, after some of the Mennonites had come to the aid of some of those in a Lasco’s group, a second discussion between the a Lasco and Menno groups ended inhospitably.
[59] Ibid., 156-57.
[65] Ibid., 891.
[71] Ibid., 395.
[78] Ibid., 136.
[79] Ibid., 138.
[81] Ibid., 17.