

The Expository  
Genius of

*Steven J. Lawson*

# JOHN CALVIN

A LONG LINE of GODLY MEN



“Through an introductory study of John Calvin’s preaching, Steve Lawson provides a practical Homiletics I refresher course that can be read in one evening, but should be read annually for lifelong impact. Factual yet stimulating, simple yet penetrating, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin* contains many scriptural and theocentric golden nuggets and hands-on practical tips for beginning expositors and seasoned preachers alike. May God use it to revitalize Christ-centered and Spirit-empowered applicatory preaching in our needy day.”

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President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

“An infectious appreciation of the preaching of John Calvin from the pen of Steven Lawson. No one reading this volume can fail to appreciate the debt we owe to the ‘Genevan Reformer.’ Lawson has consulted the best of current scholarship and has produced a comprehensive distillation of the contours of the Reformer’s preaching and, with it, a compelling advocacy of consecutive expository preaching. A magnificent achievement.”

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Senior minister, First Presbyterian Church  
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“Calvin’s commitment to ‘the word of God,’ whether as inscripturated or incarnate in Christ, is well-known. What has not been given its due, however, is his high regard for ‘words’—both the words of the Old and New Testament in their original languages and of the preacher in his sermons on the sacred text. Steve Lawson’s

study treats the second closely, and this is where this book will prove most valuable and is most urgently needed.”

—DR. HYWEL R. JONES  
Professor emeritus, Westminster Seminary California  
Escondido, Calif.

“The cure for the ‘dys-exposition’ that afflicts today’s pulpits has been available for five hundred years, as Steve Lawson so clearly documents in *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*. Preachers reading this book will be moved to take to heart Calvin’s encompassing belief in the sovereignty of God’s Word—as to its total sufficiency and massive potency. Further, they will be inspired to pursue the deep, enriching paths of *lectio continua*. This is a beautifully written, powerful, and convincing book. It is a must read for all who aspire to preach the word.”

—DR. R. KENT HUGHES  
Senior pastor emeritus, College Church  
Wheaton, Ill.

“In this book, Dr. Steve Lawson has masterfully presented us with thirty-two keynotes that made Calvin the best preacher of the Reformation, all of them centered around the Word of God preached expositively. He describes for us in a powerful as well as profound way how Calvin brought his congregation upward to gaze upon God’s glory as he preached verse by verse, then ended his sermons with prayers filled with the Word! Dr. Lawson is right in saying that because of the spiritual bankruptcy of our time, we need Calvins once again. I would make this book recommended reading in courses such as homiletics and missions for any serious pastor and student of theology.”

—DR. ALONZO RAMÍREZ  
Professor, Biblical Reformed Seminary  
Peru

The Expository Genius of  
John Calvin

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# The Expository Genius of John Calvin

STEVEN J. LAWSON



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To John MacArthur—  
faithful shepherd, peerless expositor,  
defender of the faith.

For almost forty years, Dr. MacArthur has stood in the pulpit at Grace Community Church and has been the gold standard of biblical exposition for an entire generation of preachers. His masterful preaching through books of the Bible, as well as his New Testament commentaries, study Bible, seminary, college, missionary academy, and worldwide radio ministry, make him, I believe, the John Calvin of our day.

*For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord,  
and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake.*

(2 COR. 4:5, NASB)





# Contents

Preface: Standing on Holy Ground .....	xi
1 Calvin's Life and Legacy .....	1
2 Approaching the Pulpit .....	19
3 Preparing the Preacher .....	35
4 Launching the Sermon .....	49
5 Expounding the Text .....	59
6 Crafting the Delivery .....	75
7 Applying the Truth .....	93
8 Concluding the Exposition .....	107
Conclusion: "We Want Again Calvins!" .....	117
Appendix A: <i>John Calvin's Verse Distribution for Sermon Series</i> ...	121
Appendix B: <i>John Calvin's Unspoken Outline of Job 21:13–15</i> Organized by T. H. L. Parker .....	125
Index .....	129
About the Author .....	133



## Preface

# Standing on Holy Ground

To step into the pulpit is to enter onto holy ground. To stand behind an open Bible demands no trifling with sacred things. To be a spokesman for God requires utmost concern and care in handling and proclaiming the Word. Rightly does Scripture warn, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1).

But sad to say, we live in a generation that has compromised this sacred calling to preach. Exposition is being replaced with entertainment, preaching with performances, doctrine with drama, and theology with theatrics. Desperately does the modern-day church need to recover its way and return to a pulpit that is Bible-based, Christ-centered, and life-changing. God has always been pleased to honor His Word—especially His Word *preached*. The greatest seasons of church history—those eras of widespread reformation and great awakening—have been those epochs in which God-fearing men took the inspired Word and unashamedly preached it in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the pulpit goes, so goes the church. Thus, only a reformed pulpit will ultimately lead to a reformed

church. In this hour, pastors must see their pulpits again marked by sequential exposition, doctrinal clarity, and a sense of gravity regarding eternal matters. This, in my estimation, *is the* need of the hour.

This book is the first of a series that will examine the varied ministries of noted men from church history. Given the pressing need in our time for powerful pulpits, preachers will be a key focus. The reason for this emphasis is simple—I can think of no better discipline for preachers today, apart from the study of Scripture itself, than to examine the biblical exposition of spiritual giants from the past.

To that end, this book will investigate the preaching of the great Reformer of Geneva, John Calvin. Future books in this series will delve into the ministries of other gifted preachers, such as Martin Luther, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and others. These mighty men were used by God to reform the church, confront the world, and alter the flow of history. At the very epicenters of these extraordinary ministries were pulpits that were anchored to the Word. In a very real sense, these pulpits were the hinges upon which history turned.

As we look back upon those men and the momentous times in which they lived, certain questions must be raised: What marked the preaching of these influential men? What were their commitments in the public proclamation of the Word? The approaches these men took to the pulpit must receive our closest attention if we are to see another great movement of God in our day.

As we consider Calvin's life and work, we will survey the distinguishing marks of his pulpit ministry, consider the core pre-suppositions that undergirded his biblical preaching, and examine

his personal preparation for the pulpit. Along the way, we will gain an overview of his preaching itself—his sermon introduction, interpretation, application, conclusion, and final intercession. In short, we will explore the distinguishing marks of Calvin's expository genius.

The goal here is not to take a sentimental journey—the hour is too desperate for such a triviality. Rather, the aim of this book is to raise the bar for a new generation of expositors. The method is to see what a commitment to biblical preaching looks like by examining the work of a man who was sold out to this sacred duty.

If you are a preacher or teacher, may you be challenged to a higher standard in your handling of the Word. If you are a supporter of one called to this ministry, may you know how best to pray. May all who read these chapters find them impactful and inspirational, mighty and motivational—all for the ushering in of a new reformation.

I want to express my gratitude to the team at Ligonier Ministries for their keen interest and involvement in this project. Tim Dick, president and chief executive of Ligonier, first saw the value in this book being placed in your hands. Greg Bailey, director of publications for Ligonier's Reformation Trust Publishing division, did a masterful job of fine-tuning my work, and Creative Director Chris Larson added his talented touch to the graphic design.

At Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, I want to thank the elders, pastors, and congregation, who urged me to pursue God's will in writing this book. I also want to thank my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document and coordinated the efforts, and Keith Phillips and Mark Hassler, who provided invaluable help in researching and working with the manuscript.

THE EXPOSITORY GENIUS OF JOHN CALVIN

At home, my wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, have only encouraged me in my writing assignments. May all who read this book know the loving home environment in which I study and write.

*Soli Deo gloria!*

—Steven J. Lawson  
Mobile, Alabama

# Calvin's Life and Legacy

*Calvin had no weapon but the Bible. . . . Calvin preached from the Bible every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to be transformed. As the people of Geneva acquired knowledge of God's Word and were changed by it, the city became, as John Knox called it later, a New Jerusalem from which the gospel spread to the rest of Europe, England, and the New World.<sup>1</sup>*

—JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE

**T**owering over the centuries of church history, there stands one figure of such monumental importance that he still commands attention and arouses intrigue, even five hundred years after his appearance on the world stage. Called “one of the truly great men of all time,”<sup>2</sup> he was a driving force so significant that his influence

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1 James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 83–84.

2 Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism* (Dallas, TX: Scholarly Reprints, 1993), 24.



shaped the church and Western culture beyond that of any other theologian or pastor. His masterful expositions of Scripture laid down the doctrinal distinctives of the Protestant Reformation, making him arguably the leading architect of the Protestant cause. His theological thunder defined and articulated the core truths of that history-altering movement in sixteenth-century Europe. In turn, those lofty ideas helped fashion the founding principles of Western civilization, giving rise to the republican form of government, the ideals of public education, and the philosophy of free-market capitalism.<sup>3</sup> A world-class theologian, a revered exegete, a renowned teacher, an ecclesiastical statesman, an influential Reformer—he was all of these and more. His name was John Calvin.

First and foremost, however, Calvin was a *pastor*—the faithful shepherd for twenty-five years to a local flock in Geneva, Switzerland. Every pastor has many demands on his time, and Calvin, because of his status in Geneva, had more responsibilities than most. Reformation historian J. H. Merle d’Aubigné wrote:

On Sundays [Calvin] conducted divine service, and had daily service every other week. He devoted three hours in each week to theological teaching; he visited the sick, and administered private reproof. He received strangers; attended the consistory on

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3 For further reading, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford, England, and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990, 2001), 219–261; John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (London, England; Oxford, England; and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1954, 1967), 411–425; and Jeannine E. Olson, “Calvin and Social-Ethical Issues,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 153–172.

Thursday, and directed its deliberations; on Friday was present at the conference on Scripture, called the *congregation*; and, after the minister in office for the day had presented his views on some passage of Scripture, and the other pastors had made their remarks, Calvin added some observations, which were *a kind of lecture*. . . . The week in which he did not preach was filled up with other duties; and he had duties of every kind. In particular, he devoted much attention to the refugees who flocked to Geneva, driven by persecution out of France and Italy; he taught and exhorted them. He consoled, by his letters, “those who were still in the jaws of the lion”; he interceded for them. In his study he threw light on the sacred writings by admirable commentaries, and confuted the writings of the enemies of the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

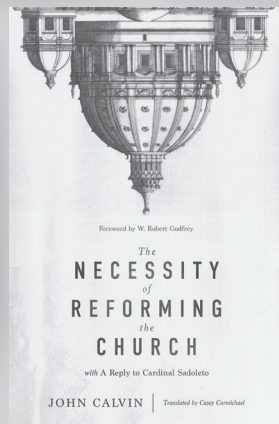
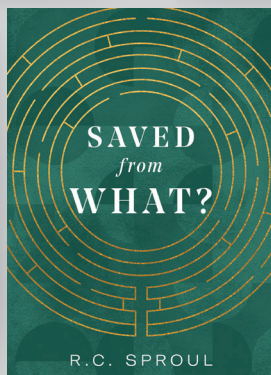
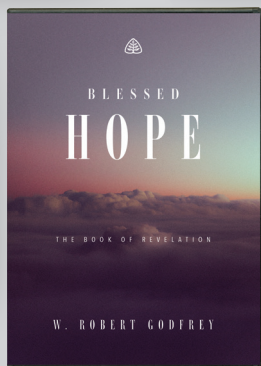
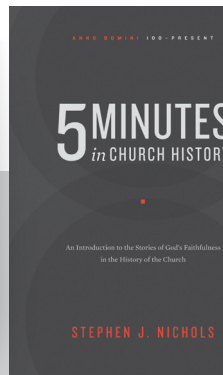
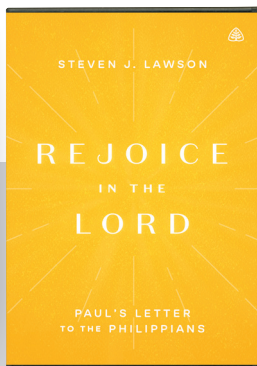
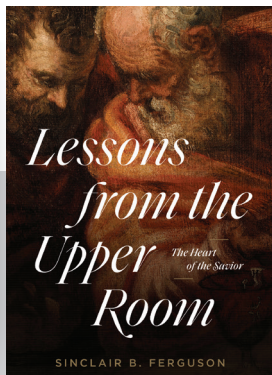
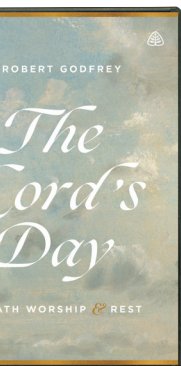
But amid these many pastoral duties, Calvin was primarily a *preacher*, a biblical expositor of the highest order. Indeed, the German Reformer Philip Melancthon labeled him simply “the theologian,” an indication of the respect Calvin was accorded for his abilities as an interpreter of Scripture. In his years in Geneva, Calvin viewed the pulpit as his principal responsibility, the first work of his pastoral calling. Thus, this magisterial Reformer gave himself to the exposition of the Word as perhaps no one else in history. He esteemed and elevated biblical preaching to be of highest importance, and so he made it his lifelong commitment.

As a result, apart from the biblical authors themselves, Calvin stands today as the most influential minister of the Word of God the

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<sup>4</sup> J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, vol. 7 (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1880, 2000), 82.

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