

The Essence of Missionary Theology from the Perspective of John Calvin

I. Introduction

Missions is the work to preach the Gospel of God's Kingdom by God's people for non-believers. The method and strategy can vary in nature according to the culture, but ultimately the essence of the Gospel should not be distorted. The Bible is the record of God's redemptive history from Genesis to Revelation. In other words, missions is that the sinners in the world may obtain eternal life through the missionary work (Jn. 3:16; Matt. 28:18-20). This is the simple and clear truth not to be negotiated or compromised. Above all, the Gospel urges to repent to God to all people, and it says the Good News to be the grace of forgiveness through the work of Jesus Christ (Lk. 24:46-48).

The sins of people have even spread in any society regardless of gender, age, occupation or organization. If he or she cannot resolve the problem of sin in heart, s/he cannot achieve peace and justice even in the world.¹ The Gospel is indicating the problem and is providing the simple and joyful message so that the sinners can be God's people through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.² John Calvin constantly says that the core of the gospel is to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins (Lk. 24:47; Acts 5:31).³ It is that Calvin has the desire of salvation to enter the Kingdom of God as "the goal of faith" (*scopus fidei*).⁴

¹Han Chul-Ha, "A Word of Proposal to the International Conference on Evangelical Theology" (Unpublished, 2001), 2.

²Han Chul-Ha, 『21st Century Mankind Dead or Alive: The Only Way to Life』 (Seoul: ACTS Publishing Co., 2003), 24.

³John Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1960), 592.

Accordingly Christian missions must preserve, protect and proclaim the "traditional constants" of the church. At the same time it must set up clearly the "constants" in order to react creatively and boldly in different context in terms of mission theology.⁵ Evidently Calvin has provided its foundation in his theology.

II. Mission Theology Deviated from the Truth of the Gospel⁶

Christian history has been full of events to happen in the result of that whether the people called by God have obeyed His Words or listened to other words different from His. In the history of the Old Testament, God gave the covenant through Noah and Abraham (Gen. 8, 12), and let His people know His laws through Moses. God's people have responsibility and duty not only to preserve but to keep the laws as His divine commandments. In the New Testament, God gives "the Great Commission"(Matt. 28:18-20, Ac. 1:8; Mk. 16:15) to His people through Jesus Christ in order to fulfill the ultimate purpose in a deep and close relationship by obeying and listening to the voice of God in

⁴"As we obtain through Jesus Christ our savior forgiveness of sins and sanctification, so also salvation has been given, in order that we may at last be led into God's kingdom, which will be revealed on the last day, and this is indeed the head and almost the sum of the all those things which the Lord by his sacred Word offers and promises us. This is the goal set for us in his Scripture; this is the target he sets."(*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536 first edition, 43). Recited by Han Chul-Ha, "How can we say that the salvation in the 21st Century depends upon ACTS"(Unpublished, 2006), 3.

⁵ Steven Bevans & Roger Schreiter, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Trans. by Kim Youngdong(Seoul: Christian Herald, 2007), 35.

⁶Chong Hung-Ho, "Direction of evangelical theological education in missiological perspective",

『Theology and Mission』 (Seoul: ACTS Publishing Co., 1988), 6-8.

the Bible to move into action.⁷

In the history of modern missions, we have seen many devotees to sacrifice themselves and to give obedience to the will of God to fulfill the Lord had commanded. However, without knowing properly God's salvific will, those who teach missions with humanistic ideas have resulted in negative factors for missions.

As Johannes Verkuyl defined, missions is the work of salvation by God the Father, His Son and the Holy Spirit activating to be able to expand the Kingdom of God on earth.⁸ God's Kingdom has the real meaning to exist the present and the future together (already and not yet). It is no doubt that the King of the kingdom is God. He is the King. At the same time He must be the King. This is the key to solve the problems in the Gospel.⁹ This Kingdom of God must be believed through the Gospel and the message should be proclaimed in any circumstance.

Theology as well as missiology with the biblical concept of God's reign should not fail that personal repentance must be involved as the necessary condition for entering the Kingdom of God.¹⁰ This Kingdom Jesus proclaimed was not the means to accomplish the political purpose to be brought to a close

⁷David J. Hesselgrave, "To Whom Are We Listening?" In *International Journal of Frontier Missions*. Vol. 11:1 (January 1994), 3-5.

⁸Donald A. McGavran, "What is Mission?" In *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*. eds. by Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 29.

⁹George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1987), 63.

¹⁰Johannes Verkuyl, "The Biblical Notion of Kingdom." In *The Good News of the Kingdom*. eds. Charles Van Engen and others (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 73.

such as liberation, oppression and unjust taxes from the Roman colonial rule. Rather, the Kingdom has shown God's redemptive activity with spiritual and ethical transformation. His Kingdom means the presence of God not only to save but also to rule His people quite different from what many Jews had expected at that time.¹¹

When viewed from the theological perspective, the incarnated Son of God, Jesus Christ himself is not only the Gospel that we must proclaim but also the historical fact that he must be the center of faith. Even surrounded by various cultures, there is the Creator God in this principle. It indicates the attribute of missions essentially in Christian faith. In other words, with the faith to believe in One God as the Father of Jesus Christ as well as the Father(*abba*) of believers, missionaries must find out the dynamic mission of God(Jn. 14:6) to save people in His redemptive history through Jesus Christ. This is the essential ministry to expand missions in each country.

Each culture in multi-cultural societies should be respected. A culture itself, however, cannot take the place of God's transcendental truth.¹² Unless the Gospel wears a cultural cloth, it will be not delivered effectively. But it does not mean that the Gospel is limited according to a cultural form. In other words, we must recognize that the Gospel is dualistic and simultaneous truth to transcend all cultures.

Even in theological and missiological studies, if not highlight these points, these studies are likely to be flowing into religious pluralism or syncretism,

¹¹Arthur f. Glasser, "The Whole-Bible Basis of Mission." In *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 37.

¹²J. Samuel Escobar, "Mission Studies Past, Present, and Future." In *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol. XXIV, no. 1. (January 1996), 24.

tolerating the wave of the present world as western Europe. If the doctrines of God, sin, Christ, redemption and the authority of the Bible cannot take the correct seats in theological education, missionary consciousness will disappear. Moreover, it is also adversely detrimental to the growth of the church.

Fundamentally, the essential issue of mission theology is at stake: how to understand and apply God's will for salvation toward the sinners of this world.

III. Awareness of the seriousness of salvation

What is more required of those who proclaim the gospel today is “the reality and universality of perdition.” The universality that humans have sinned before God and are ultimately judged and destroyed applies regardless of gender, age, race, or culture, and there can be no exceptions to this.

The need for missions comes from the reality of “perdition” and the urgency to spread the message that people must avoid destruction and become “people of heaven.” Calvin sees that recognizing “a heavenly tribunal” is the beginning of the Christian religion.¹³ For Calvin, the foundation of Christianity is based on the sure knowledge of the heavenly throne, judgment, and eternal punishment. When this foundation is broken, an ambiguous theological stance is taken regarding the death of Jesus Christ, the existence of heaven, the necessity of repentance, judgment after death, and eternal punishment.

From the beginning, through “*Institutes of the Christian Religion*”, Calvin begins by simultaneously questioning knowledge of God as well as knowledge of oneself. However, if this is misunderstood, it may lead to a tendency to downplay the “experience of salvation” or “good deeds.” In other words, if

¹³ Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion*, III, 12:1.

people focus on the knowledge of God and emphasize it, it is easy to miss the issues behind it. However, we see that Calvin raised his problem seriously from the beginning.¹⁴

To him, the “Christian religion” is a religion of “salvation of the soul” that requires religious experience. A person who does not seriously question his or her sinfulness as a being who “stands before God” (Coram Deo) cannot be said to have properly understood Calvin’s theology.¹⁵

Calvin believed that we ourselves, standing before the light of God's wisdom, power, and all goodness and righteousness, should properly feel ignorance, futility, poverty, weakness, and above all, depravity and corruption. This feeling refers to our experience. It is said that those who feel this are pricked by injustice, corruption, foolishness, and uncleanness.

It can be said that Calvin did not downplay the so-called “religious experience,” but rather emphasized it more. Furthermore, Calvin said about an extreme experience. He says that “whenever they feel the presence of God, believers are overwhelmed, stricken and overcome with dread and wonder.” He emphasizes how important the experience is by even expressing that he is “in fact overwhelmed by the dread of death and almost annihilated.”¹⁶

We must examine whether we have true repentance within ourselves and whether we have true faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. These two are so closely connected that one cannot exist without the other. We must know that if our life is in Christ, there is only death within us. If we find our strength in Him, we also must recognize our weakness. If all our happiness lies in His grace, we must know how miserable we would be without it. If we have a rest in Him, we must feel only disquietude and torment in us.

¹⁴Han Chul Ha, “Direction of the Korean Churches”(Unpublished, 2000), 12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion*, I, 1:1-3.

Such a feeling must firstly cause dissatisfaction with our life as a whole, secondly it must give rise to anguish and fear, and finally it must give rise to a desire for righteousness and a heart of love. Because, apart from God, he is ashamed to know the enormity of his sin and the wretchedness of his condition, and he cannot help but be dissatisfied with himself, constrained to sigh and groan in great sadness.

Moreover, God's justice appears immediately and plunges the miserable conscience into severe anguish, with no escape and no excuse. Under such a conviction of our misery, when we have tasted the goodness of God, we desire to control our actions according to His will, and to completely clean up our past life. And we want to be created into a new creation within it.¹⁷

Those who experience assurance of salvation bear the fruit of good deeds. When Calvin talks about soteriology, he devotes a lot of space to the life of a regenerated Christian and the good deeds of the soul that has received forgiveness of sins, pointing out how important salvation and good deeds are related. These teachings eventually led to the Moravian movement, which left great achievements in missionary history, and the Wesleyan movement.¹⁸

Calvin's religion of truth, which has the most universal validity of being a "good man" and doing "good deeds" and "shine like the sun" in the "kingdom of one's father," became the faith of the Moravians and Wesleyans 200 years later. Through the movement, many heavenly believers were raised, and the religion was introduced to Korea through the first missionaries. After the liberation from the Japanese reign, when the Korean church faced a great crisis due to the infiltration of liberal theology, Dr. Park Hyungyong's religious conservative movement continued to support the Korean church to this day. It came alive and moving.¹⁹

¹⁷ Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper", 22. Recited. Han Chul Ha, "Direction of the Korean Churches", 13.

¹⁸ Han Chul Ha, *ibid.*, 14.

The doctrine of “justification by faith” is the core truth of Christianity; For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart the works of the law.”(Rom. 8:28) Paul says the reason why “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.”(Rom. 3:20) Even though “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), God has promised that “those who are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ.” (Rom. 3:24)

God sent Jesus Christ to this earth for sinners who were destined to destruction due to their sins, and gave them the great grace of forgiving their sins with His precious blood. Therefore, as Jesus Christ declared, only Jesus Christ is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6), and there is no way to come to God without believing in him. This declaration must be a solid foundation that leaves no room for today's Inclusivism or Religious Pluralism. Experiencing the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ is directly related to the experience of repentance and rebirth, and Calvin clearly mentions this at the beginning of his soteriology.²⁰

However, this doctrine does not mean that good works are not necessary for salvation. Calvin emphasizes this point in several places.²¹ In fact, Calvin and other religious reformers rejected faith without good deeds as anomism. In this way, “justification by faith” is necessarily related to good deeds, that is,

¹⁹ Han Chul Ha, 『21st Century Mankind Dead or Alive: The Only Way to Life』 , 283.

²⁰ Han Chul Ha, “Direction of the Korean Churches”, 15. "For since pardon and forgiveness are offered through the preaching of the gospel in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the Kingdom of God, surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance"(Institute of the Christian Religion. III, 3, 1).

²¹ cf: *Institute of the Christian Religion*, III, 14.

sanctification. Calvin even strongly states that he has never dreamed of a faith without good deeds.²² This part can be said to be an important theological foundation required not only for missionaries working in countries where other religions are strong, especially Islamic, Buddhist, or Hindu countries, but also for Christians in those countries.

It is clear that sinful humans gain salvation through faith, but there can be no salvation without good works. The teachings of the Bible also point out this very point.²³ Calvin emphasizes that sinners must repent, receive forgiveness of their sins, be reborn, and show good fruits by continuing to be in God's pardoning love and not fall into sin again. Therefore, Calvin called such good deeds the second grace.²⁴

After introducing the great grace of "justification by faith," Apostle Paul said, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law." (Romans 3:31) The great commandment of the law is the demand for love: "Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Thus, Paul teaches, Calvin teaches, and Wesley teaches that "faith" and "love" are always paired and that "faith" establishes "love." In other words, through faith in Jesus, we can

²² Ibid., 16.1. "We dream neither of a faith devoid of good works, nor of a justification that stands without them."

²³ "Do you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God?"(1Cor. 6:9); "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person--such a man is an idolatry--has inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words"(Eph. 5:5-6).

²⁴ *Institute of the Christian Religion*. III, 14, 9. "We confess that whole through intercession of Christ's righteousness God reconciles is to himself, and by free remission of sins accounts us righteous, his beneficence is at the same time joined with such a mercy that through his Holy Spirit he dwells in us and by his power the lusts of our flesh are each day more and more mortified; we are indeed sanctified, that is, consecrated to the Lord in true purity of life, with our hearts formed to obedience to the law. The end is that our especial will may be to serve his will and by every means to advance his glory alone."

receive forgiveness of our heavy sins and do good deeds. If we believe in the Lord Jesus, we can even do "good deeds" through that living faith.²⁵

God not only accepts us sinners as righteous through the intercessory work of Jesus Christ, but also adds the grace of "sanctification" to the grace of "justification" through His mercy. By doing so, doing God's will and giving glory to Him brings the greatest joy to His children. God's giving of the grace of good deeds in this way is called "works of righteousness, *operum justitia*."²⁶

Calvin's theology begins entirely with "theocentrism", which holds that God is the center and source of everything. Accordingly, all parts of Christianity are arranged around faith and prayer. In other words, it is a simple truth that humankind was created but fell, and that sinners eventually come to believe through the gospel ministry of the church and obtain "salvation and eternal life" by praying to God.

To summarize this, ultimately, through the gospel and faith, we ourselves become Jesus Christ's and can participate in the salvation and eternal life he gives. However, since humans are not diligent enough to grow and develop their faith on their own, God allows them to reach their destination through external help called the church. Therefore, God allowed the church to keep the treasure of the gospel, so that pastors and teachers may preach and teach the gospel through the ministry. In fact, Calvin clearly stated what should be taught and

²⁵Han Chul Ha, "Direction of the Korean Churches", 15.

²⁶ *Institute of the Christian Religion*, III, 17, 10. "Now whence does this pardon arise, save that God contemplates us and our all in Christ? Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified. Now if this works righteousness—whatever its character—depends upon faith and free justification, and is effected by this."

conveyed through the church, and the purpose was not only to have faith, but also to grow and develop and ultimately obtain the salvation of “eternal life.”(cf. 2Tim. 3:15; John 20:31).²⁷

In other words, the purpose of writing the Bible, God's revelation, is to enable sinners to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, to be saved in his name, and to gain eternal life. Calvin also said that ultimately, the content of the Bible is that people should find the gospel in the Bible and believe in it through the preaching of the gospel proclaimed in the church so that they can be saved and enjoy eternal happiness. And we can clearly see that in Calvin's argument and the content of the Bible, the center is in “salvation.”²⁸ We must not overlook that this central truth (salvation of sinners) is not one of several *pars* (parts), but must always be at the center. However, unfortunately, many churches have too quickly abandoned this center and have become obsessed with various *pars*, or have lost the seriousness of the center.²⁹

With the development of today's technological civilization, the gospel of “salvation” becomes more and more urgently needed for all people as we hear news from all over the world. The legitimacy of missions begins with the proposition that everyone is sinner before God. God still wants “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim. 2:4)

²⁷ Han Chul Ha, “Direction of the Korean Churches”, 5

²⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁹ Ibid., 7.