

JOHN CALVIN ON THE LAST DAYS IN II TIMOTHY 3

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About half of the 27 inspired books of the New Testament Scriptures were penned by Paul. Although all of the apostle's epistles contain eschatological teaching,¹ only I and II Thessalonians treat aspects of the end times in all of their (eight) chapters. Specific chapters in Paul's letters treat key eschatological subjects, such as God's purposes with Israel in the New Testament age (Rom. 11), the man of sin (II Thess. 2) and the resurrection of the body (I Cor. 15).

However, in only a couple of places does the great apostle to the Gentiles use the important end-times phrase "the last days" (II Tim. 3:1) or "the latter times" (I Tim. 4:1). Of these two passages, II Timothy 3 is the longer and more detailed, and so is more significant.

John Calvin is arguably the greatest theologian and exegete of the Reformation. In his commentary on II Timothy 3, what does he understand by the crucial eschatological temporal indicator "the last days"?² When does this period begin and end? Does Calvin's exposition of this chapter fit with post-millennialism's alleged "golden age"? What does he present as the calling of believers and pastors in "the last days," according to II Timothy 3?

I. The Period of the Last Days

In his exegesis of II Timothy 3:1, the Genevan Reformer defines this key end-times term with reference, first of all, to the duration of the *Christian church*, which began on the day of Pentecost and is built by the exalted Christ who reigns at God's right hand (Matt. 16:18-19; Acts 2): "*In the last days*."

¹ With the possible exception of Philemon, though see verse 15.

² His exposition of the 17 verses of this chapter is found in John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: vol. 21, Galatians, Ephesians, Philipians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), pp. 236-251. References to this work will be given in parentheses.

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Under ‘the last days,’ he [i.e., Paul] includes the universal condition of the Christian Church” (236).

Second, Calvin immediately further identifies this period as that of the Messiah’s *kingdom*: “Nor does he [i.e., Paul] compare his own age with ours, but, on the contrary, informs Timothy what will be the future condition of the kingdom of Christ” (236).

Third, our Bible commentator reinforces his point by explaining “the last days” in terms of the New Testament *gospel* era (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16):

In short, he means that there will not be, even under the gospel, such a state of perfection, that all vices shall be banished, and virtues of every kind shall flourish; and that therefore the pastors of the Christian Church will have quite as much to do with wicked and ungodly men as the prophets and godly priests had in ancient times (237).

In other words, in his first three sentences exegeting “the last days” in II Timothy 3:1, Calvin identifies them as embracing the period of the Christian church, kingdom and gospel, respectively. Moreover, his third sentence on “the last days” (above) speaks of the era of “the gospel” and “the Christian Church” as coextensive. Later, after referring to the “evils” of “the last times,” our Reformer writes similarly, “So then, from the very beginning of the gospel, the Church must have begun to be affected by such corruptions” (239; cf. 240-241).

The era of the gospel of the crucified and exalted Lord Jesus, and of the New Testament kingdom and church which it creates, includes what Calvin called “the present day” (237), the sixteenth century when he flourished and wrote his commentary on II Timothy; the “Popish clergy” and church (e.g., 238, 239, 247) in the many centuries before and since the French Reformer; continuing right up to the second coming of our Saviour for the great assize (II Tim. 4:1). Thus, in his commentary on this verse, Calvin writes,

Who shall judge the living and the dead. More especially the Apostle fixes attention on the judgment of Christ ... By “the living and the dead” are meant those whom he shall find still alive at his coming, and likewise those who shall have died.

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There will therefore be none that escape his judgment.

The appearance of Christ and his kingdom mean the same thing; for although he now reigns in heaven and earth, yet hitherto his reign is not clearly manifested, but, on the contrary, is obscurely hidden under the cross, and is violently assailed by enemies. His kingdom will therefore be established at that time when, having vanquished his enemies, and either removed or reduced to nothing every opposing power, he shall display his majesty (252-253).

These being the *last* days of world and church history, there is nothing beyond them except the eternal state: the new heavens and the new earth for the elect, and the lake of fire for the impenitent wicked. For Calvin, “the last days” cover “the future condition of the kingdom of Christ,” from the first century AD all the way to our Lord’s bodily return, and describe “the universal condition of the Christian Church” (236). In other words, “the last days” embrace the whole of the period between Christ’s first and second comings (“future”) in the church’s full geographical extent (“universal”).

Thus the Genevan Reformer explains that the instructions and commands in II Timothy 3 were highly relevant to “evangelist” Timothy (II Tim. 4:5) and the church in his day, and do not merely apply to the years immediately prior to Jesus’ bodily return:

This exhortation sufficiently shows that Paul does not speak of a distant posterity, nor foretell what would happen many ages afterwards; but that, by pointing out present evils, he applies to his own age what he had said about “the last times;” for how could Timothy “turn away” from those who were not to arise till many centuries afterwards? So then, from the very beginning of the gospel, the Church must have begun to be affected by such corruptions (239).

The attentive reader may have noticed in the quotes above that our theologian rightly identifies “the last days” (236) with “the last times” (239, 240; cf. I Pet. 1:20). According to the French Reformer, this is the period of our Jesus Christ’s New Testament “gospel” (237, 239, 240-241), “kingdom” (236) and

“Church” (236, 239, 240). “The last days” embrace Paul and Timothy in the first century, Calvin in the sixteenth century and us in the twenty-first century.

There are 9 New Testament verses on the “last” or “latter” “days,” “times” or “time” (Acts 2:17; I Tim. 4:1; II Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; James 5:3; I Pet. 1:20; II Pet. 3:3; I John 2:18; Jude 18). This eschatological era began with our Lord’s incarnation, redemption and outpouring of His Spirit (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; I Pet. 1:20) and will end with His second coming to raise the dead, judge all men and angels, and usher in the eternal state (cf. Acts 2:17-21; James 5:3-9; II Pet. 3:3-4, 8-14). Calvin’s identification of the period covered by this key eschatological term in his commentary on II Timothy 3 (and elsewhere) is undoubtedly correct.

II. The Character of the Last Days

What about postmillennialism’s alleged future golden age before Christ’s bodily return? The 1901 Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church has been chosen as a representative of that eschatological view because it is both comprehensive and explicit:

Prophecy shows that a time is coming when the Kingdom of Christ shall triumph over all opposition and prevail in all the world. The Romish Antichrist shall be utterly destroyed. The Jews shall be converted to Christianity. The fullness of the Gentiles shall be brought in and all mankind shall possess the knowledge of the Lord. The truth in its illuminating, regenerating and sanctifying efficacy shall be felt everywhere, so that the multitudes of all nations shall serve the Lord. Knowledge, love, holiness, and peace shall reign through the abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Arts, sciences, literature, and property shall be consecrated to the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. The social institutions of men shall be regulated by gospel principles, and the nations as such shall consecrate their strength to the Lord. Oppression and tyranny shall come to an end. The nations, instead of being distracted by wars, shall be united in peace. The inhabitants

of the world shall be exceedingly multiplied, and pure and undefiled religion shall exert supreme dominion over their hearts and lives so that happiness shall abound. This blessed period shall be of long duration.

Is this biblical doctrine on the last times? Does this fit with the “prophecy” of II Timothy 3? What is the teaching of the great Reformer of Geneva on the character of the last days in his commentary on this important chapter?

A. Peace and Perfection?

Does John Calvin’s doctrine of the last times or of the period preceding the bodily return of our Lord agree or fit with (this abbreviation of) the Reformed Presbyterian Testimony?

... the Kingdom of Christ shall triumph over all opposition and prevail in all the world ... Knowledge, love, holiness, and peace shall reign ... Oppression and tyranny shall come to an end. The nations ... shall be united in peace ... and pure and undefiled religion shall exert supreme dominion over their hearts and lives so that happiness shall abound. This blessed period shall be of long duration.

Very different are the Reformer’s opening remarks on “the last days” in II Timothy 3:1, regarding peace and perfection, virtues and vices:

Under “the last days,” he [i.e., Paul] includes the universal condition of the Christian Church ... [He] informs Timothy what will be the future condition of the kingdom of Christ; for many imagined some sort of condition that would be absolutely peaceful, and free from any annoyance. In short, he means that there will not be, even under the gospel, such a state of perfection, that all vices shall be banished, and virtues of every kind shall flourish; and that therefore the pastors of the Christian Church will have quite as much to do with wicked and ungodly men as the prophets and godly priests had in ancient times (236-237).

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This being the “universal” and “future condition of the kingdom of Christ” in “the last days” (236), the period between Pentecost and the *parousia*, the golden age “imagined” by postmillennialism is excluded. Note well that Calvin is not merely speaking about grievous wickedness in the world with its “social institutions” and in the spheres of the “arts, sciences, literature, and property.” He states “that this is the lot of the Christian Church” itself, right through the whole New Testament gospel era (237), knowing nothing of the “long duration” of postmillennialism’s supposed golden age.

Prior to the Lord’s second coming, “his reign is not clearly manifested, but, on the contrary, is obscurely hidden under the cross, and is violently assailed by enemies” (252). Regarding “the last days” (236), the whole period between Christ’s first and second comings, Calvin speaks of “the hardship of those ‘dangerous’ or ‘troublesome’ times” (237). Thus the earthly triumph, peace and prosperity of postmillennialism are directly opposed by the Genevan Reformer as an imagination of man!

B. Spiritual Plagues

At the start of his exposition of II Timothy 3, Calvin asserts that in “the last days” “the Church will be subject to terrible diseases” (236) and “plagues” (237, 246). However, our exegete is not here thinking of physical “pestilences” or terrible bodily illnesses as one of the signs of Christ’s return (e.g., Matt. 24:7). Instead, he is using medical imagery to refer to other signs of our Lord’s second coming: the spiritual diseases, plagues and pestilences of corrupt teachers with their false doctrine and ethics spreading and facilitating apostasy (cf. Matt. 24:5, 10-12, 23-24).

Calvin explains more fully and antithetically,

It is proper to remark, first, in what he [i.e., Paul] makes the hardship of those “dangerous” or “troublesome” times to consist; not in war, nor in famine, nor in diseases, nor in any calamities or inconveniences to which the body is incident, but in the wicked and depraved actions of men. And, indeed, nothing is so distressingly painful to godly men, and to those who truly fear God, as to behold such corruptions of morals;

for, as there is nothing which they value more highly than the glory of God, so they cannot but suffer grievous anguish when it is attacked or despised (237).

What is the sphere of these evil men in II Timothy 3? Do they operate in the church or the world? Calvin is very clear as he continues his exposition:

Secondly, it ought to be remarked, who are the persons of whom he speaks. They whom he briefly describes are not external enemies, who openly assail the name of Christ, but domestics, who wish to be reckoned among the members of the Church; for God wishes to try his Church to such an extent as to carry within her bosom such plagues, though she abhors to entertain them. So then, if in the present day many whom we justly abhor are mingled within us, let us learn to groan patiently under that burden, when we are informed that this is the lot of the Christian Church (237).

Our Bible commentator refers to such people in the church as “hypocrites” who seek to keep up “the appearance of piety” as a “mask” and those who “falsely ... shelter under the name of God” (238). Regarding “the inhabitants of the world,” according to the 1901 Reformed Presbyterian Testimony, “peace and undefiled religion shall exert supreme dominion over their hearts and lives so that happiness shall abound.” But Calvin’s witness in his 1556 commentary on II Timothy 3 is very different, even as regards the professing church!

C. False Teachers

Commenting on “Jannes and Jambres,” two Egyptian priests, who “withstood Moses” (II Tim. 3:8), Calvin avers that this “confirms what I have already said about the ‘last times’” (240). This includes his earlier statement that “the pastors of the Christian Church will have quite as much to do with wicked and ungodly men as the prophets and godly priests had in ancient times” (237). The Reformer explains that Paul “means that the same thing happens to us under the gospel, which the Church experienced almost from her very commencement [in its Old Testament form], or at least since the law [of Moses] was published” (240).

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In exegeting the inspired words of Paul in II Timothy 3, the Genevan Reformer is making the same point as the apostle Peter:

But there were false prophets also among the people [in the days of Old Testament church], even as there shall be false teachers among you [in the days of the New Testament church], who privily shall bring in damnable heresies (II Pet. 2:1).

In his next sentence, Calvin reminds us of the abiding relevance of the Psalter in “the last times” (240), for, during the gospel era, from its beginning to its end, the church engages in “unceasing battles” with false teachers:

In like manner the Psalmist also speaks largely about the unceasing battles of the Church. “Often did they fight against me from my youth, now let Israel say. The wicked ploughed upon my back, they made long their furrows” (Psalm 129:1, 3). Paul reminds us, that we need not wonder if adversaries rise up against Christ to oppose his gospel, since Moses likewise had those who contended with him; for these examples drawn from a remote antiquity yield us strong consolation (240-241).

Calvin includes in the ranks of “false teachers” (241) or “false and pretended teachers” (239) “Popery” (247), “the Popish clergy” (238), “the order of monks” (239) and all other varieties of “false prophets” (239, 242, 246, 248). Our Reformer castigates the whole lot as “useless drones” (239)!

Postmillennialist David Chilton admits the truth that II Timothy 3:1-9, 13 portrays “the extent of apostasy [as] increasing as the era” progresses. This chapter and many similar passages in the New Testament predict, he rightly states, “increasing lawlessness, rebellion and heresy within the Christian community itself—just as Jesus had foretold in Matthew 24.”³

How then does Chilton try to salvage his eschatological system? He *preterizes* II Timothy 3 (and I Timothy 4, which contains Paul’s other reference to the last or latter days or times), relegating it to the safety of the past in order to make it fit with postmillennialism’s supposed future golden age. Chilton

³ David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 108.

redefines the last days as beginning with Christ's first coming (true) and ending with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 (false).⁴

Other postmillennialists correctly identify the period of the last days. In accordance with what we have seen earlier in this article, Ken Gentry accurately explains when this eschatological era begins and ends:

The last days are initiated by the appearance of the Son (Heb. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:20) to effect redemption (Heb. 9:26) and by His pouring out of the Spirit (Acts 2:16, 17, 24; cf. Isa. 32:15; Zech. 12:10) ... These will run until "the last day," when the resurrection/judgment occurs to end history (John 6:39; 11:24; 12:48) ... Because the last days have been with us since the first century-coming of Christ, there is [sic] no days to follow. There is no millennium that will introduce another grand redemptive era in man's history ... The idea of the appearance of Christ as the "Last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45) is indicative that there is no different historical age to follow.⁵

These postmillennialists, like Gentry, who rightly define the era of the last days try to evade apostolic teaching in II Timothy 3 by taking a different tack. They appeal to verse 9, "But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was." "See," they argue, "false teachers in the gospel age will be exposed, so that they will decrease in number and influence as Lord's return draws nearer. On the other hand," they continue, "true Christians will form an increasingly large percentage of the world's population until the overwhelming majority of people will be soundly converted, with almost all the world's populace being living members of vibrant orthodox churches."⁶

But this is not Calvin's exegesis of II Timothy 3:9, nor is it his eschatology. Notice, first, that the French Reformer appeals to verse 13, "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived."

⁴ Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, pp. 115-116. See also Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999), pp. 214-215.

⁵ Ken Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), pp. 326, 327.

⁶ E.g., Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 493.

... although false teachers give him [i.e., Timothy] annoyance, he [i.e., Paul] promises that they shall be, within a short time, disgracefully ruined [II Tim. 3:9]. Yet the event does not agree with this promise; and the Apostle appears to make a totally different declaration, a little afterwards, when he says that they will grow worse and worse [II Tim. 3:13]. Nor is there any force in the explanation given by [John] Chrysostom, that they will grow worse every day, but will do no injury to any person; for he expressly adds, “deceived and deceiving” [II Tim. 3:13]; and, indeed, the truth of this is proved by experience. It is more correct to say, that he looked at them in various aspects; for the affirmation, that they will not make progress, is not universal; but he only means, that the Lord will discover their madness to many whom they had, at first, deceived by their enchantments (241-242).

Second, both at the end of the quote above and in that below, Calvin rightly explains that “all” is not here to be pressed literalistically as if it meant “absolutely everybody.” Instead, it carries the force of “many.”

For their folly shall be manifest to all [II Tim. 3:9]. When he says, *to all*, it is by a figure of speech, in which the whole is taken for a part. And, indeed, they who are most successful in deceiving do, at first, make great boasting, and obtain loud applause; and, in short, it appears as if nothing were beyond their power. But speedily their tricks vanish into air; for the Lord opens the eyes of many, so that they begin to see what was concealed from them for a time. Yet never is the “folly” of false prophets discovered to such an extent as to be known to [absolutely] all (242).

Third, the Reformer appeals to the rising up of other heresies for, when one head of the Hydra is lopped off, others take its place: “Besides, no sooner is one error driven away than new errors continually spring up” (242). Thus “there will always be new occasion for fighting” by God’s Word and Spirit against heretics, for their lies keep mutating and growing (242).

After stating that “the last days constitute that period of time between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ,” Kim Riddlebarger quotes II Timothy

3:1-5, 12-13; 4:3-4.⁷ He then asks and answers his own question regarding postmillennialism:

Why did Paul warn us about heresy and false teaching if he saw such a golden age ahead for the church that the peril of false teaching is eliminated until a brief period of apostasy [immediately prior to the Lord's bodily return]? He gave us this warning because he expected heresy and false teaching to plague Christ's church until the end of the age. We must be on our guard until the day of Christ Jesus.⁸

II Timothy 3 is not the only Scripture that speaks of false teachers in the last days. It is one of five New Testament passages that do so, with the others being I Timothy 4:1, II Peter 3:3, I John 2:18 and Jude 18.⁹ Jeremiah 23:20 is an Old Testament reference to the "latter days" which, in its context, predicts false prophets in the Messianic age (and their destruction in the day of the Lord).

D. Power of Truth?

Postmillennialism stands in opposition to these Old and New Testament passages, including II Timothy 3, that prophesy of false teachers and their increasingly powerful influence through the last days. Thus the 1901 Reformed Presbyterian Testimony predicted, "The truth in its illuminating, regenerating and sanctifying efficacy shall be felt everywhere, so that the multitudes of all nations shall serve the Lord."

The "power of truth" argument that I have heard from various postmillennialists over the years runs like this: "Surely, the truth is stronger than lies! All we need to do is unleash it. Over time and in the long run, the powerful light of the truth will increasingly manifest itself and drive out the darkness of the lie!"

What, however, does the Genevan Reformer's commentary on II Timothy 3 say?

⁷ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), pp. 125-126.

⁸ Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, p. 126.

⁹ Since there are 9 New Testament texts that refer to the last days, this means that over 55% of them refer to false prophets in this eschatological period.

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One worthless person will always be more effectual in destroying, than ten faithful teachers in building, though they labour with all their might. Nor are there ever wanting the tares which Satan sows for injuring the pure corn; and even when we think that false prophets are driven away, others continually spring up in other directions (246).

These statements would be dismissed by postmillennialists as merely so much defeatist talk, were they not the words of John Calvin!

Immediately, our commentator moves from the destructive influence of the false teachers to the baleful effects of the lies they proclaim, carefully dissecting what we are calling the postmillennial argument from the “power of truth.” First, Calvin gives two explanations why speaking of the efficacy of corrupt doctrine is not dishonouring God’s invincible truth or omnipotent Spirit: “Again, as to the power of doing injury, [1] it is not because falsehood, in its own nature, is stronger than truth, or [2] that the tricks of Satan exceed the energy of the Spirit of God” (246).

Second, the Protestant Reformer gives three reasons for the persuasive power of theological lies based upon man’s total depravity, blindness and ingratitude; God’s justice and vengeance; and the devil’s dominion over unbelievers:

[It is] [1] because men, being naturally inclined to vanity and errors, embrace far more readily what agrees with their natural disposition, and also [2] because, being blinded by a righteous vengeance of God, they are led, as captive slaves, at the will of Satan. And [3] the chief reason, why the plague of wicked doctrines is so efficacious, is, that the ingratitude of men deserves that it should be so (246).

Calvin promptly adds, “It is highly necessary for godly teachers to be reminded of this” (246), lest they become discouraged by the limited visible fruit of their labours or, we might add, lest they be taken in by the abstract postmillennial argument from the “power of truth.”

Here the Christian should remember the history of his Saviour while on earth. The increasing manifestation of the Truth Himself in the Person, life,

ministry, miracles and teaching of Jesus Christ led not to the conversion of the majority of the Jews but to His cross! At His trial, Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire and the most sophisticated jurisprudence at that point in human history, doubted the know-ability or even the existence of truth (John 18:38) and sentenced to crucifixion the incarnate Truth who was standing before him.

This is the same Jesus who had earlier explained that “*because* I tell you the truth, ye believe me not” (John 8:45). The apostle who penned II Timothy 3, a few verses later wrote,

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables (II Tim. 4:3-4).

Elsewhere, Paul predicts that apostasy will bring forth the man of sin (II Thess. 2:3), who will deceive those who

received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness (II Thess. 2:10-12).

So much for the “power of truth” argument!

However, the gospel is powerful to regenerate, illumine and purify the hearts and lives of God’s elect by the irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit! Over against the reprobate who are led astray by the working of the mystery of iniquity, the apostle adds,

But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (II Thess. 2:13-14; cf. Rom. 1:16-17).

E. Persecution

When John Calvin's commentary reaches II Timothy 3:12, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution," he begins with the obvious point: "Having mentioned his [i.e., Paul's] own persecutions [II Tim. 3:11], he likewise adds now, that nothing has happened to him which does not await all the godly" (244).

Our exegete reiterates this lesson regarding all believers in the last days:

... all the children of God ... [endure] persecutions ... we are Christians on this condition, that we shall be liable to many tribulations and various contests ... it is absolutely unavoidable that all of them shall have the world for their enemy ... they have a warfare in common, and shall never be wholly at peace and exempt from persecutions (244-245).

Calvin anticipates the obvious objection to II Timothy 3:12: "But it is asked, Must all men be martyrs? for it is evident that there have been many godly persons who have never suffered banishment, or imprisonment, or flight, or any kind of persecution" (244). Our Bible commentator explains that the afflictions that believers suffer at the hands of evil men, stirred up by the devil, vary both in form and in degree over time:

I reply, it is not always in one way that Satan persecutes the servants of Christ. But yet it is absolutely unavoidable that all of them shall have the world for their enemy in some form or other, that their faith may be tried and their steadfastness proved; for Satan, who is the continual enemy of Christ, will never suffer any one to be at peace during his whole life; and there will always be wicked men that are thorns in our sides. Moreover, as soon as zeal for God is manifested by a believer, it kindles the rage of all ungodly men; and, although they have not a drawn sword, yet they vomit out their venom, either by murmuring, or by slander, or by raising a disturbance, or by other methods. Accordingly, although they are not exposed to the same assaults, and do not engage in the same battles, yet they have a warfare in common, and shall never be wholly at peace and exempt from persecutions (244-245).

If one looks for a deeper reason for the sufferings of God's redeemed and believing people, Calvin's commentary on II Timothy 3 provides it. Underlying the predictions of persecution in this chapter is a profound Christological and soteriological point about the Christian life. The biblical truth of the believer's union with Christ—the crucified Lord!—means that all God's children throughout the last days must bear the cross and suffer persecution for Jesus' sake (Mark 8:34; Rom. 8:17; Phil. 1:29):

... if this condition [of suffering persecution] is laid down for "all who wish to live a godly life in Christ," they who wish to be exempt from persecutions must necessarily renounce Christ. In vain shall we endeavour to detach Christ from his cross; for it may be said to be natural that the world should hate Christ even in his members. Now hatred is attended by cruelty, and hence arise persecutions (244).

Ronald S. Wallace ably presents the Reformer's scriptural teaching on the believer's persecution as patterned on Jesus Christ and His cross:

God has predestined all whom He adopts as His children to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, especially in this matter of bearing their cross as Christ bore His. Since we are destined to be conformed to Christ, we must expect to have to bear the cross as He did. What Jesus Christ suffered must be fulfilled in all His members. It is only right that the course which God has begun with Christ the first-born He should continue with all His children.¹⁰

II Timothy 3:12, and the cruciform religion of Scripture and Calvin, all through the period between Christ's first and second comings, cannot be squared with postmillennialism's golden age. After all, throughout this "blessed period" of "long duration," according to the claims of the 1901 Testimony, "the Kingdom of Christ shall triumph over all opposition and prevail in all the world," and "Oppression and tyranny shall come to an end," for "pure and undefiled religion shall exert supreme dominion over their hearts and lives so that happiness shall abound."

¹⁰ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), p. 44.

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Besides II Timothy 3, there are three other New Testament references to the persecution of believers in the last days (James 5:3; II Pet. 3:3; Jude 18). Moreover, there are three Old Testament texts that, in their contexts, prophesy of the sufferings of God's people for His cause at the hands of their enemies: Jeremiah 30:24 (Babylon), Ezekiel 38:16 (Gog and Magog; cf. Rev. 20:7-9) and Daniel 10:14 (Antiochus Epiphanies IV; cf. Dan. 11:21-12:3; II Thess. 2:4).¹¹

III. The Calling of the Last Days

A. Believers

Since II Timothy is a pastoral epistle written, first of all, to one of Paul's closest fellow labourers, most of the admonitions in Calvin's commentary on II Timothy 3 concern Christian ministers. However, the Genevan Reformer does address the calling of believers in the last days at appropriate points in his exposition of II Timothy 3. The subjects of these exhortations can be reduced to, and grouped under, three main heads: false teachers, gospel persecution and inspired Scripture.

First, the great Genevan theologian states that the saints must accurately identify and recognize heretics in the sphere of the church: "As it was the design of Paul to brand false prophets with such marks, that they might be seen and known by all; it is our duty to open our eyes, that we may see those who are pointed out with the finger" (238-239).

Regarding the evil characteristics of these "hypocrites" (238) listed in II Timothy 3:2-5, Calvin believed that Scripture's clarity permitted his brevity. Thus he focused merely on the "first" vice which is the "source" of all the others in ungodly people, especially in the church.

To spend time in explaining every word [in these verses] would be superfluous; for the words do not need exposition. Only let my readers observe that *φιλαυτία*, *self-love*, which is put

¹¹ Audios and videos of 20 eschatology classes dealing with the 9 New Testament texts and the 14 Old Testament texts on the last days are available on-line (www.cprc.co.uk/resources-on-eschatology).

first, may be regarded as the source from which flow all the vices that follow afterwards. He who loveth himself claims a superiority in everything, despises all others, is cruel, indulges in covetousness, treachery, anger, rebellion against parents, neglect of what is good, and such like (238).

These wolves in sheep's clothing must be rejected and avoided by God's people: "from such turn away" (II Tim. 3:5)!

Second, Calvin does not exhort the saints to hope and prepare for earthly peace, power and prosperity before the Lord's return, as if he believed that postmillennialism's golden age were coming. Instead, the Genevan theologian urges us to be ready, and even prepared, to suffer for Christ and His gospel:

Having mentioned his own persecutions, he [i.e., Paul] likewise adds now, that nothing has happened to him which does not await all the godly. And he says this, partly that believers may prepare themselves for submitting to this condition ... [Paul] exhorts all the children of God to prepare for enduring persecutions (244).

Third, the believer is to be filled with a holy awe towards Jehovah's inspired Word (II Tim. 3:16). Calvin devoutly states, "we owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God; because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it" (249).

We must also understand the purpose of God's Word, as our French theologian declares,

It is a very high commendation of the Holy Scriptures, that we must not seek anywhere else the wisdom which is sufficient for salvation ... But he [i.e., Paul] states, at the same time, what we ought to seek in the Scripture; for the false prophets also make use of it as a pretext; and therefore, in order that it may be useful to us for salvation, it is necessary to understand the right use of it (248).

Commenting on II Timothy 3:16, Calvin explains more fully the way that we benefit from the Word:

... we are to learn from the Scriptures ... [that the] most valuable knowledge ... is “faith in Christ.” Next follows instruction for regulating the life, to which are added the excitements of exhortations and reproofs. Thus he who knows how to use the Scriptures properly, is in want of nothing for salvation, or for a holy life. *Reproof* and *correction* differ little from each other, except that the latter proceeds from the former; for the beginning of repentance is the knowledge of our sinfulness, and a conviction of the judgment of God. *Instruction in righteousness* means the rule of a good and holy life (250).

This third calling is key to fulfilling the other two. Equipped by God’s Word, we are able to recognize and reject false teachers. Likewise, the Scriptures prepare us for, and comfort us in, times of persecution.

B. Pastors

Moving from the calling of believers in the last days, what are Calvin’s exhortations to pastors in his commentary on II Timothy 3? Does he share the perspective of the postmillennial Reconstructionists that Christian ministers are to view and treat the church as a sort of “boot camp” to train believers to take over all of the earth’s institutions and exercise dominion in every sphere of human activity? To use the language of the 1901 Testimony, are pastors to preach and teach in order to equip believers for leadership roles so that, in the last times or in the alleged golden age, “Arts, sciences, literature, and property shall be consecrated to the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. The social institutions of men shall be regulated by gospel principles”?

This is neither Calvin’s hope nor his paraenesis. In the very first words of his commentary on the prophecy concerning the last days in II Timothy 3, the Reformer writes,

By this prediction he [i.e., Paul] intended still more to sharpen his [i.e., Timothy’s] diligence; for, when matters go on to our wish, we become more careless; but necessity urges us keenly. Paul, therefore informs him, that the Church will be

subject to terrible diseases, which will require in the pastors uncommon fidelity, diligence, watchfulness, prudence, and unwearied constancy; as if he enjoined Timothy to prepare for arduous and deeply anxious contests which awaited him. And hence we learn, that, so far from giving way, or being terrified, on account of any difficulties whatsoever, we ought, on the contrary to arouse our hearts for resistance (236).

Therefore, gospel ministers have “no time for idleness or for repose” (237). Instead, they must “be prepared for uninterrupted warfare, and ... not be discouraged by delay, or yield to the haughtiness and insolence of adversaries” (246).

Given the contents of II Timothy 3 and Calvin’s exposition of this chapter as set out in this article so far, the reader will easily appreciate that the Reformer’s exhortations to believers concerning false teachers, gospel persecution and inspired Scripture could easily be amplified as regards pastors. This is his basic message to them: Fortify yourselves and the congregations committed to your care by sound doctrine drawn from the God-breathed Scriptures, so that the body of Christ can see through the false teachers and their doctrines, and endure persecution by the grace of God!

What is striking is Paul’s (II Tim. 3:10-11, 14) and, therefore, Calvin’s presentation of the apostle himself as an “example” (243, 244) for Christian ministers in all these areas. Since the great apostle to the Gentiles is a “very lively picture of a good teacher” (243), each pastor is to be “an imitator of his ... virtues” (243).

What is even more distinctive in II Timothy 3, and so in Calvin’s commentary on it, is the emphasis on the victory of the Word of God over false teachers and their doctrine. Calvin writes of “prosperous success” (242) and even “the sure hope of a successful issue” (242). Regarding II Timothy 3:9, “But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was,” our Reformer comments, “He [i.e., Paul] encourages Timothy for the contest, by the confident hope of victory; for, although false teachers give him annoyance, he promises that they shall be, within a short time, disgracefully ruined” (241).

Calvin on the Last Days in II Timothy

However, neither Paul nor Calvin is referring to the postmillennial claim of an almost wholly Christianized world “of long duration” prior to our Lord’s return, but of defeating the “false teachers” (241) by refuting them with sound doctrine (241-242). This is what has happened throughout the history of God’s church from the very beginning (240-241), and the truth of the all sufficient Scriptures will be used by faithful pastors to expose and refute all the lies that will arise in the future (cf. II Tim. 3:15-17).

Let us cite some biblical examples. Moses confounded Jannes and Jambres (Ex. 7-9; II Tim. 3:8-9), as our French theologian explains and applies (240-243). Jeremiah defeated the false prophets of his day by the invincible Word of God (e.g., Jer. 5:13-14; 23:28-29). In His public ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ exposed the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and priests. Paul overcame many false teachers, including Elymas (Acts 13:6-12), the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:18-34), the Jewish leaders at Rome (Acts 28:17-29), Hymenaeus and Alexander (I Tim. 1:20), and the pseudo-apostles in Corinth and Galatia.

Moving from God’s Word to church history, we will cite just two “godly teachers” (242, 246) out of the many individuals who could have been chosen. By the truth of the canonical Scriptures, Augustine triumphed over the Manicheans and the Arians, and the Pelagians and the Semi-Pelagians. Calvin himself refuted the Romanists and the Anabaptists, the Libertines and the Nicodemites, as well as Sadolet, Osiander, Hesshusius, etc.

These biblical and church historical examples illustrate the truth that not all nor most nor even many false teachers or their followers were converted by the faithful witness of God’s servants. Instead, Jehovah’s spokesmen were assured that His Word triumphed over the lies of their unbelieving opponents. His elect believing people saw clearly where the truth lay and the unbelieving errorists were convicted in their consciences, even if they refused to admit it in this world (cf. Rom. 1:18).

The apostle, Calvin writes, “promises that the doctrine of the gospel shall be victorious against every kind of errors that may be invented” (242-243). No matter how vicious the attack on Scripture or how plausible the denials of creation or how ingenious the assaults on the cross or how crafty the forms of auto-soterism or how hellish the corruptions of the doctrine of the

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Trinity or how attractive the perversions regarding worship might appear to the flesh, etc., the inexhaustible riches of the Word of God will provide the answers to godly pastors and Christ's beloved church. Even with Antichrist's "all deceivableness of unrighteousness" (II Thess. 2:10), Scripture's arsenal of truth will be sufficient so that none of the elect will be taken in (Matt. 24:24).

In short, pastors in these last days must be [1] encouraged by the promise of the victory of the truth and [2] strengthened for the ongoing struggle against the lie. As the Reformer of Geneva explains,

Both admonitions are therefore necessary. [1] That godly teachers may not despair, as if it were in vain for them to make war against error, they must be instructed about the prosperous success which the Lord will give to his doctrine. [2] But that they may not think, on the other hand, that they are discharged from future service, after one or two battles, they must be reminded that there will always be new occasion for fighting (242).

These two points are so true and necessary!