

Miall on Man-Centred 'Religion'

I want to open with this topic, even though Miall, in his book, dealt with it later. I do so because I look upon it as a point of the highest significance. Indeed, in my view, when talking about where churches go astray, it is the fundamental point. Go wrong here, leave the rails here, and nothing can go right. I am talking about placing man at the centre of things; man, not God. 'Who does that?' Far more than would be willing to acknowledge it!

Miall was explicit. The evangelical world he saw about him was, too often, promoting a man-centred system, preaching a man-pleasing 'gospel', all of which was leading to compromise with the truth, resulting in downright pragmatism (what 'works' must be right):

An inadequate perception, and hence a low appreciation, of the ultimate drift and purpose of the gospel economy I apprehend to be the root of many of the morbid symptoms exhibited by the British churches. The grand consideration which prompted God¹ to devise and put in force the dispensation of which Christ is the appointed head, should be in order to our thinking, feeling, willing, acting in unison with him, the dominant motive with us, in the reception, study and exemplification of revealed truth.²

Let me rephrase that. It demands it. It merits it. Miall's fog index rating, alas!

What is God's design in the gospel? Get this wrong, nothing goes right. What did the triune God have in mind when he decreed the everlasting salvation of his elect in and through the person, merit and work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? Whatever that is, there lies the motive for everything the believer – and the *ekklēsia* – does. Moreover, whatever God's end is in his plan of salvation, that should govern the

¹ Miall had 'the Divine Mind'.

² Miall pp130-131.

believer in his reading of Scripture. The believer should always be promoting that end.

The dominant motive for believers in their approach to Scripture should be to get their minds to think scripturally, their hearts to love, their wills to submit to and their lives to experience and obey what the Spirit reveals to them through Scripture, all in perfect harmony with God's mind.

In short, believers must be governed and driven by God's word. Nothing else! Not by worldly methods, worldly aims, worldly measures of 'success'. For the believer, pragmatism is taboo – or should be. Revelation is king! As Miall said, this 'should be' a given among believers. But, alas, as in his day, so in ours, it is not. Lip service is paid to the principle – 'Christ is the Head of his church' is a tenet which I suppose, appears in almost every church confession – but pragmatism, what 'works', aping the world, is indeed 'the root of many of the morbid symptoms exhibited by [many of today's] churches'.³ Above all, Miall was talking about aim and purpose in the life of the believer both individually and corporately.

Miall spelled out what ought to be the norm for the believer and the *ekklēsia*, starting with the absolute fundamental (or what ought to be fundamental). What is the absolute end governing the individual believer and the *ekklēsia*? What was God's design in the gospel, in sending his Son into the world? No hesitation can be tolerated here: Scripture is explicit. Miall:

Taking Scripture as our guide, we should say that the idea constantly in the ascendant, and made paramount to all others, is the first to which the angels gave utterance, in announcing the birth of Jesus: 'Glory to God in the highest'.⁴

Spot on! And in two respects. Scripture is the only ground on which believers must build every spiritual principle and

³ Witness Bill Hybels, Saddleback, Willow Creek, Ray Evans. I am writing a book on this very topic.

⁴ Miall p131.

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practice. And the glory of God is *the* end for which believers live, and under which they are governed:

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pet. 2:11-12).

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen... if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name (1 Pet. 4:10-11,16).

Indeed, should believers not be following Christ in this? His supreme delight was to glorify his Father:

When the crowds saw [the miracle wrought by Jesus], they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men (Matt. 9:8).

Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once (John 13:31-32).

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with

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the glory that I had with you before the world existed (John 17:1-5).⁵

Not that we need secondary support, but as the Westminster Shorter Catechism opens: 'What is the chief end of man?' The answer: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever' – and in that order!⁶ And as it immediately goes on to say:

What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

The word of God, which is contained in [that is, comprises] the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Let me say just a little more about all this. It is so important. The glory of God is the ultimate end of all things. It must be so in the believer's life, both individually and in the *ekklēsia*. And by 'the glory of God', I mean the magnifying and honouring of God's name in the salvation of sinners and the progressive sanctification of saints, leading to their absolute Christ-likeness with him in glory; that must be the end or purpose of it all.

But – and this was Miall's point (and it is mine in publishing this book) – too often this is *not* the norm today. The churches, though, as I say, they pay lip service to the mantra 'For the Glory of God by his Word', too often substitute another aim, a very different aim, and another measure of success. Oh yes they do! Miall spotted it, and was not afraid to draw attention to it:

I apprehend that, in our reading of God's message, *man* occupies the first place in our attention; *God*, a subordinate one. The grand purport of it [that is, the gospel], as we [mistakenly] receive it, cherish it, promulgate it, is human rather than divine, [it] has respect to our safety more than to his rights, [and it] constitutes our happiness [as] the goal of

⁵ 'Glory' is a major theme in John. Indeed, so it is throughout the entire Bible. But not the glory of man!

⁶ The Catechism offers Ps. 86:9; Isa. 60:21; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:31; Rev. 4:11 as proof texts.

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the gospel, and subjection to God merely a necessary mode of arriving at it... The religion of our day seems to me to be especially wanting in this which should be its prime characteristic. It leaves self paramount still. It concerns itself primarily, and almost exclusively, with personal safety. And the salvation which it searches after, receives, exhibits and enforces is summed up in four⁷ words: 'the greatest possible happiness' [for man]... Emotions awakened [in men] are a response to a recognition of incalculable advantage gained, not of glorious moral character perceived and appreciated. We change not so much our end, as our mode of pursuing it. The revelation of God is not the main purport of our gospel, but the elevation of man. Admiration of him [that is, God] is second to delight in our own destiny.⁸

Let me translate. Miall was saying that the church in its preaching and practice too often majors on man's happiness, man's sense of fulfilment, both now in this life, and, in the ultimate, in heaven when he dies. All seems to be designed to please man, to gratify man, to show what is 'in it for him' – or, at the very least, not to offend him. When addressing sinners with the 'gospel', preachers are too apt to stress the benefits to man, while little is said about the glory of God. Let me explain. God will be glorified in both the salvation of his elect and the damnation of the reprobate. Of course, the preacher should aim for the former, but sinners should be left (note the word) under no illusion. Whatever may be said of sinners in their unregeneracy, there is no doubt that they are deluded (1 Cor. 1:18,21,23,25; 2:14). They are blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 3:14; 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:26). So whatever the preacher has to do, he has to set about removing this blindness, stripping away this delusion. But the 'user-friendly' approach, 'Relationship-Evangelism' approach, actually bolsters the natural man's delusion. It so emphasises the benefits to be gained by the sinner, so underplays the cost in trusting Christ,⁹ that it actually enforces the sinner's delusion.

⁷ Miall had 'three' but the definite article, I think, must be counted.

⁸ Miall pp132-138.

⁹ When I was a very young believer, I was told that in becoming a Christian I had to give up nothing. I should have been told the exact

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It leaves the sinner with the motive he had before his 'conversion'; namely, self-interest. The only thing that has changed is the way of attaining that end. Self-interest still rules, but now it is tagged with 'Christ', 'the gospel', 'salvation', and the like. I have deliberately used inverted commas in this paragraph to stress that all this is falling foul of Paul's stern – but utterly necessary – words to the Galatians very near the opening of his letter:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel (Gal. 1:6-11; see also 2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Tim. 1:3).

The unregenerate are accountable, rational sinners, and they are answerable to God, and they will glorify him by their salvation if they repent and trust Christ, or else they will glorify God by perishing under his wrath for their refusal to trust the Saviour. Preachers dare not hide this. As the apostle put it:

opposite. In coming to Christ, you give up everything! See Luke 9:23-26. I preached that passage at a baptising service. It provoked the criticism (in a visitor, a professing believer) that I had been too solemn. I speak of thirty years since. I quote from my *Infant* p171: 'I fear that many teenage baptisms in [a growing number of] churches may be little more than social events. Indeed, it is worse. In some cases, they are little removed from a party atmosphere, a kind of half-way house between an English wedding-breakfast and an American high-school graduation, tinged with religion. I speak with sadness of what I know of this growing phenomenon'.

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Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-17).

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing (2 Cor. 4:1-3).

Christ was explicit. First he set out the freeness of grace in the gospel:

Whoever believes in him will have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned... (John 3:15-18).

Immediately continuing:

...but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:18,36).

Miall was levelling serious charges, very serious charges. But he was right! Indeed, I am making those same charges myself. Too often today, man is supreme; not God. Man's happiness – our happiness – this is what counts; not God's glory, God's rights. Conversion from sin to holiness so that the converted sinner will live a life to God's glory – this is not the issue, this

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is not the thrust of the contemporary preaching I am criticising. No! Eternal bliss for man, a sense of his well-being now and eternal security to come, this is what matters. This is the impression conveyed. Too often preachers preach, not for the glory of God (whatever may be alleged to the contrary), spelling out his demands on the sinner, but to assure sinners that what we preach centres on them and their happiness. Man is the focus, the sun of our gravitational system, around whom everything revolves.

Miall was blunt:

The practical consequences of substituting the effect for the cause in this matter are not only serious, but make themselves visible in every direction.¹⁰

Let me unpack this a little. The 'effect' is the happiness of man; the 'cause' is the glory of God. The 'cause' should be our aim; the 'effect' should follow as a consequence of the former. Miall was asserting that Victorian evangelicals were inverting the order – if, indeed, the glory of God really did figure in their calculations. Yes, it would appear in all mantras and confessions, but in practice?

The evidence is there for all to see; that is, for all who want to see. Miall:

Man's relation to the substantial verities of divine revelation is not changed, it is true, but... his susceptibility of impression by that aspect of the gospel which is most prominently, and almost exclusively, presented to him from the pulpit and the press is slowly but steadily lessening.¹¹

Smith explained:

That is to say, the churches [in Miall's day] were failing to communicate the gospel faithfully or effectively; their truncated gospel appealed to human self-interest.¹²

I contend that this sums up much of the contemporary scene.

¹⁰ Miall p139.

¹¹ Miall p152.

¹² Smith in Clark p167.

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And it has consequences, very serious consequences. As Miall declared (alas in a sentence of inordinate length; taking into account the ellipsis, I make it something like 140 words):

Had the churches generally, by preaching and by practice, presented the message of God by his Son more to the moral sympathies of men, and less to their sense of personal interest... had the paramount idea they brought to bear upon the world been that of the transcendently glorious character of God, as imaged in Jesus Christ, instead of the benefit accruing to men from the mediatorial work [of Christ], they would have diffused around them an atmosphere of thought and sentiment which, instead of hardening the unsubdued [that is, unbelievers] into indifference and recklessness, would have progressively mellowed them into susceptibility of impression.¹³

Unfortunately, such a ponderous sentence needs unpacking. Let me have a go at it.

If only the churches had kept to God's word! If only they preached the gospel to glorify God, and thus bring benefit to man – instead of the other way round! How this would have aroused sinners! Instead, by concentrating on man, by making man and his happiness the focus of attention, by boosting man, the churches produce apathy, and promote delusion. Oh, for an awakening and God-glorifying ministry!

The fact is, by making man the centre of attention and focus of activity, sinners are made indifferent, careless. They need to be awakened, made to tremble. They must be confronted with the duty to repent and believe. Yes, they must be given the free, warm and welcoming invitations of the gospel (such as, for instance, Matt. 11:28-30). Even so, they need to learn there is iron in the velvet. As Paul put it:

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others (2 Cor. 5:10-11).

¹³ Miall p154.

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...the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering –since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed (2 Thess. 1:5-10).

And the writer to the Hebrews:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31).

And Peter:

It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Pet. 4:17).

Miall turned the searchlight onto the churches once more:

Their error has been, not in setting forth the mode in which, and the extent to which, the benefit man can gain by the gospel affects his eternal destiny,¹⁴ but in setting it forth chiefly, almost exclusively. Now whatever it may be said of this or [that] passage of Scripture as sanctioning the course here criticised,¹⁵ it will not be denied, I imagine, that the tendency of the Bible as a whole is to direct supreme attention to God himself – what he is, what he does, what he purposes. The churches, I think, cannot be said to aim at precisely the same object. Hence the apparently increasing weakness of the instrument they wield. A high state of spiritual prosperity and power is nearly unknown among them.¹⁶

¹⁴ Miall had 'the economy of favour affects the eternal destiny of man'.

¹⁵ Miall had 'animadverted on'.

¹⁶ Miall pp154-155.

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It was only right that Miall should acknowledge the obvious, which he did; namely, that God does offer eternal bliss for sinners in and through the Lord Jesus Christ in the gospel. Yes, of course. But the error is to turn this into the chief end in trying to reach the unsaved, putting this forward as the great motive for sinners to trust Christ. Even worse, to make it the be-all and end-all of that endeavour. As we have seen, God's great end in his decrees – all of them (allowing that we can talk of decrees in the plural) – is his own glory. See, for instance, Exodus 14:4,17-18; Isaiah 43:6-7; 48:9-11; 49:3; Jeremiah 13:11; Habakkuk 2:14; John 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 16:14; 17:1; Romans 9:22-23; 11:36; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 10:31; Ephesians 1:4-6,12-14; 1 Peter 4:11. And the glory of God, therefore, must be the dominant motive for every aspect of the life of the believer and the *ekklēsia*. This is the ultimate in the theology of the new covenant.

Miall thus set out the cause of the weakness, the powerlessness, of the churches in spirituality and preaching: they had turned their eyes away from the glory of God to gain for man. In short:

That to which attention has just been directed [by many churches] consists in putting *man* in the place of *God* as the prime object of the gospel.¹⁷

I publish Miall on this because I share his persuasion. I see something similar in much that passes for contemporary church life.

But the problem did not arise simply in Victorian times, and that is why I now include an excursus on events in the 16th century. Yes, there is nothing new under the sun!

Excursus: The debate between Sadoletto and Calvin

In 1539, Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto, Cardinal Bishop of Carpentras, France, wrote to the magistrates and citizens of Geneva, urging them to return to the Catholic faith. John

¹⁷ Miall p156.

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Calvin replied. The polemical interchange between the two men hinges on the very issue raised by Edward Miall in this present chapter. Because of its relevance – as I have explained, to my mind, it is an important contemporary issue – I want to quote from the exchange of letters between Sadoletto and Calvin. But before I do, let me quote Lester DeKoster's comments on the debate. The issue in hand will be obvious at once:

Sadoletto pens a shrewdly calculating address to self-interest. More precious to each of us, he says, than any other possession is our immortal soul or everlasting self; more crucial, therefore, than any other decision we can make is that governing our final destiny. Shall we live for ever in the presence of God or endure the torments of hell?

Such is the papist position. Our first concern must be ourselves, our everlasting destiny, our eternal salvation. This trumps everything. In other words, self-interest is in the driving seat. It is all about 'me'; in other words, egotistical.

In reply, said DeKoster:

Calvin sounds the keynote of the Reformed understanding of Christianity by immediately discounting self-interest (even self-interest in heaven) as sound motivation. Man is made by God, for God's purposes in history. The Bible is replete with evidence that God's purposes may not accord with man's conception of immediate advantage. By obtruding itself between God's will and man's response, self-interest becomes reaction, and leads to repression and stultification.

DeKoster broadened the point:

The Cardinal's Church [that is, the Roman Catholic Church] has placed its own interests above those of both God and [the] believer, and stands against reformation and progress.¹⁸

So much for DeKoster's comments on the debate. Now to let the two protagonists have their say.

¹⁸ Lester DeKoster in his 'Foreword' to John C.Olin (ed.): *A Reformation Debate: John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto...*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp1-2.

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First, Sadoletto. Remember, he was writing to the magistrates and citizens of Geneva:

That we may begin with what we deem most seasonable, I presume, dearest brethren, that both you and I, and all else besides who have put their faith and hope in Christ, do, and have done so, for this one reason; that is, that they may obtain salvation for themselves and their souls – not a salvation which is mortal, and will quickly perish, but one which is ever-during [that is, everlasting] and immortal, which is truly attainable only in heaven, and by no means on earth.

In other words, the only reason – not merely the prime reason, please note – the only reason we trust Christ is that thereby we obtain salvation. No other motive comes into it.

Sadoletto pressed on, hammering home this notion of self-interest:

How important it is, how deeply it concerns us to secure our soul and its salvation, because our soul is our whole selves, is properly our good and only good, while all other goods are foreign to us, and disjoined from us, and cannot in any degree be enjoyed, if we fail of obtaining this, which is first and truly ours. In order to defend and preserve the interest of their souls, so many most glorious martyrs of Christ in former times have cheerfully laid down this mortal life.

He continued:

Since these things are so, dearest brethren, since our salvation, since our true life, since eternal felicity, since ourselves, in short, ought to be, in the first place, and above all things, dear to us, since if we lose ourselves we shall never more find anything that is truly ours – that is, to delight or belong to us – since no heavier loss, no more fatal evil, no more dreadful calamity, can befall us than the loss and perdition of our souls, how great zeal, I ask, with what care and anxiety of mind, ought we to guard against exposing our life and salvation to this great danger? You will surely grant and concede to me that nothing more pernicious and fearful can happen to anyone than the loss of his soul. I presume you will therefore grant also that there is no event against the

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occurrence of which we ought to guard with greater zeal and diligence.¹⁹

Calvin replied:

As to your preface, which, in proclaiming the excellence of eternal blessedness, occupies about a third part of your letter, it cannot be necessary for me to dwell long in reply. For although commendation of the future and eternal life is a theme which deserves to be sounded in our ears by day and by night, to be constantly kept in remembrance, and made the subject of ceaseless meditation, yet I know not for what reason you have so spun out your discourse upon it here, unless it were to recommend yourself by giving some indication of religious feeling. But whether, in order to remove all doubt concerning yourself, you wished to testify that a life of glory seriously occupies your thoughts, or whether you suppose that those to whom you wrote required to be excited and spurred on by a long commendation of it (for I am unwilling to divine what your intention may have been), it is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God.

Calvin was saying that he was unable to fathom Sadoletto's motive in stressing self-interest. He rather thought that he was trying to show how 'spiritual' he was. Leaving that to one side, however, for Sadoletto to encourage men to cultivate and gratify self-interest as their prime motive – actually, as we have seen, Sadoletto had talked of self-interest as the *only* motive for man – making him, Sadoletto, guilty of abominable ('not very sound') theology.

Calvin went on:

For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves. As all things flowed from him, and subsist in him, so, says Paul (Rom. 11:36), they ought to be referred to him.

¹⁹ Olin pp32,36,38.

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Calvin, of course, was not denying that the gospel does call upon sinners to trust Christ for salvation. But this is where we need to be scripturally clear and precise:

I acknowledge, indeed, that the Lord, the better to recommend the glory of his name to men, has tempered zeal for the promotion and extension of it, by uniting it indissolubly with our salvation. But since he has taught that this zeal ought to exceed all thought and care for our own good and advantage, and since natural equity also teaches that God does not receive what is his own unless he is preferred to all things, it certainly is the part of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul. I am persuaded, therefore, that there is no man imbued with true piety, who will not consider as insipid that long and laboured exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God. But I readily agree with you that, after this sanctification [of the name of God], we ought not to propose to ourselves any other object in life than to hasten towards that high calling; for God has set it before us as the constant aim of all our thoughts and words and actions. And, indeed, there is nothing in which man excels the lower animals unless it be his spiritual communion with God in the hope of a blessed eternity. And generally, all we aim at in our discourses is to arouse men to meditate upon it and aspire to it.²⁰

Yes, said Calvin, of course, the desire for eternal bliss is a great motive, a biblical motive, and sinners must be urged and encouraged to trust Christ for salvation. Yes. But... even in this, they must be made to realise that all things – not least, their eternal salvation – are for the glory of God. That must be the motive of all motives for all things.

²⁰ Olin pp58-59.