

## Calvin the Pastor

By Ian Hamilton

Martin Bucer's well known words, "True theology is not theoretical, but practical. The end of it is living, that is to live a godly life" (*Vera theologia non theoretica, sed practica est; Finis siquidem eius agere est hoc est vitam vivere deiformem*),<sup>1</sup> were exemplified in Calvin's multi-gifted ministry and shaped his understanding of pastoral ministry. Christian theology aims at persuading and enabling Christians "to live a godly life"; or as Calvin would have put it: The mark of true doctrine is godly piety.

To call John Calvin a pastor is a little like saying that Michael Jordan played basketball. Calvin was, of course, many things: a consummate theologian; an insightful exegete; a hammer of heretics; a sought-after spiritual counsellor; a letter-writer par excellence; a peerless writer of Tracts and Treatises. But before he was any of these things, he was—by calling, by choice and by conviction—a pastor; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that "in all" of these things, he never forgot that he was first and foremost a pastor. *The Institutes* were prompted by a deep concern for his own countrymen. In the Preface he tells us that he "toiled" at the task of writing it, "especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I knew to be hungering and thirsting for Christ."<sup>2</sup> Everything he was and everything he did was shaped by his sense that God had called him to pastor his flock in Geneva. Calvin was far from oblivious to the wider influence and impact of his ministry. He was a truly international Christian. But his first love was the fickle, feisty flock that he was called to pastor in Geneva. His best energies were devoted to their establishing and maturing in the faith and he literally wore himself out in serving their good.

One day every Christian pastor will give an account to the Chief Shepherd of their ministry. On that day each will surely be asked, "And did you care for my sheep, the sheep I bought with my own blood?"

In his Commentary on Acts 20:20 (that Paul taught publicly and from house to house), Calvin wrote:

For Christ has not appointed pastors on this condition, that they may only teach the church in general in the open pulpit; but that they may take charge of every particular sheep, that they may bring back to the sheepfold those who wander and go astray, that they may strengthen those who are discouraged and weak, that they may cure the sick, that they may lift up and set on foot the feeble ... for common doctrine will oftentimes wax cold, unless it is (supported) with private admonitions.<sup>3</sup>

It is hard not to hear the echo of Christ's words in John 10:3: "(the shepherd) calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Calvin was deeply concerned to know by name and need all his flock.

That Calvin should have been so committed to the pastoral care of the church in Geneva, and beyond, is remarkable. He led the work of Reformation in Geneva from 1536 to his death in 1564 (with a two year absence from 1538–1540). He wrote commentaries on

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1. *Commentary on The Gospel of John*, quoted in Brian Lugioyo, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification* (OUP, 2010), 54.

2. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Library of Christian Classics, Volume XX, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960), 9.

3. John Calvin, *Commentaries XXII*, Acts of the Apostles, vo. XIX (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 244.

most books in the Bible. He wrote theological treatises. He preached or gave lectures in the church in Geneva at least six times every week. He wrote many letters to confirm the faithful, defend the faith, and give courage to believers suffering for their faith.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of all this he wrote, developed and enlarged his *magnum opus*, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. And yet Calvin unceasingly committed himself to the pastoral care of the flock God had entrusted to his care. By any measurement, Calvin was a remarkable Christian.

However, Calvin was a man of faults. He had a temper which could be volcanic and which caused him afterwards the deepest distress. Like the heroes of the faith in the Bible, Calvin was sinfully flawed. While this should remind us never to put our trust in ‘princes’ (Ps. 146:3), no matter how Reformed in theology and godly in piety, it also reminds us that God uses flawed and fallible servants to great effect in the perfecting of his church.

So, what were the main features of Calvin’s pastoral ministry?

First, Calvin’s pastoral ministry was carried out in the conviction that the Lord Jesus Christ is the church’s chief Shepherd/Pastor. In his Commentary on 1 Peter 5:4, he writes: “It ought to be also observed that he calls Christ the chief Pastor; for we are to rule the Church under him and in his name, in no other way but that he should be still really the Pastor.”<sup>5</sup> This conviction is surely the keynote or pulsebeat of any pastoral ministry worthy of the name. All pastors do is to be done as men who are accountable to the church’s Chief Shepherd (Heb.13:17). This truth alone ought to knock all notions of pride out of our heads. The church is Christ’s own flock. It is the church “which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The congregations which pastors serve are Christ’s own, his chosen, blood-bought Bride. They may be at times cranky, fickle, slow to learn, and disputatious; but they are Christ’s own.

It was this conviction which brought Calvin back to Geneva in 1541. In 1538 he had been dismissed from his position, and with a light heart, Calvin went to the Reformed stronghold of Strasburg, under the watchful care

of Martin Bucer. In 1540, a number of Calvin’s friends urged him to return to Geneva. His response was unambiguous! He wrote to Pierre Viret, “I read that passage in your letter, certainly not without a smile, where you shew so much concern about my health, and recommend Geneva on that ground. Why could you not have said at the cross? For it would have been far preferable to perish once for all than to be tormented again in that place of torture. Therefore, my dear Viret, if you wish well to me, make no mention of such a proposal.”<sup>6</sup> However, the following year he returned, why? He wrote to Farel in August 1541, “As to my intended course of proceeding, this is my present feeling: had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord... Therefore I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held-fast, to the obedience of God; and whenever I am at a loss for counsel of my own, I submit myself to those by whom I hope that the Lord himself will speak to me.”<sup>7</sup>

Here is the ‘real’ Calvin; he was a man *Deus subegit* (subdued by God). Calvin’s personal emblem was a picture of a flaming heart held up in a hand with the inscription: *Cor meum tibi offero, Domine, prompte et sincere* (My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely).

As a pastor, Calvin lived out his conviction (that he learned from the Bible) that he was not his own. It was the prerogative of the church’s chief Shepherd to direct his church and to place his under shepherds as he willed. It is the privilege and responsibility of pastors to trust and obey, and embrace God’s call, however costly that call may be.

Second, Calvin’s pastoral ministry reflected his conviction that love to Christ is the animating pulsebeat of all truly pastoral ministry. In his Commentary on Jesus’ words to Peter, “Do you love me?... Feed my sheep” (John 21:15), Calvin wrote:

By these words Christ means that no man can faithfully serve the Church and employ himself in feeding the flock, if he do not look higher than to men ... No man, therefore, will steadily persevere in the discharge of this office, unless the love of Christ shall reign in his heart, in such a manner that, forgetful of himself and devoting himself entirely to Christ, he overcomes every obstacle.<sup>8</sup>

This for Calvin was the one indispensable quality needed to be a pastor: love for Christ. “Those who are called to govern the Church ought therefore to remember that, if

4. Theodore Beza wrote, ‘it is wonderful with what zeal he exerted himself to counsel and refresh the exiles, by every kind of attention, to say nothing of the letters which he wrote for the consolation of those who continued in the very lion’s jaws’ (*Tracts and Letters*, 1.xli-xliii).

5. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXII, 146.

6. John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 4.187.

7. Calvin, *Tracts*, 4.280–281.

8. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIII, 288.

they are desirous to discharge their office properly and faithfully, they must begin with the love of Christ” (on John 21:15).<sup>9</sup> Calvin understood, as the Reformed tradition as a whole did, that where love to Christ is absent, everything is absent. The motive that animates men as pastors is foundational to their usefulness: “Simon, do you love me?” It should be a pastor’s regular discipline to ask himself, ‘Do I do what I do out of heart love for my Saviour?’ It is only too easy for pastors to slip into a mode of professional routine. All the right things are done, but the glory will have departed (1 Samuel 4:21).

Third, Calvin’s pastoral ministry was shaped by his conviction that how we worship God must be shaped and styled by his word. Calvin was acting first as a pastor in the matter of the careful thought he gave to worship. In his treatise, *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543), a document to be presented by the leaders of the Protestant movement to the Emperor Charles V, Calvin’s concern was not merely to construct a sound, biblical doctrine of worship: “If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.”<sup>10</sup>

Getting worship “right” was for Calvin the first need of Christ’s flock. Calvin’s ranking worship as first in importance over salvation was due to one very important fact, namely that salvation is a means to an end, with worship being the end itself. We are saved to worship God, now and eternally, with our public worship being a foretaste of the heavenly worship that awaits us. In pastoral ministry our calling and aim is not merely to help our brothers and sisters sink their lives into Christ, who is himself the grace of God, and find all they need out of their union with him; we cannot be satisfied until we see them worshipping God with all their heart! The ultimate reason why the church has a commission to ‘make disciples of all nations,’ is not to see sinners saved and fitted for heaven. Evangelism is a more ultimate purpose, winning men and women, boys and girls, to God’s worship.

In his reply to Cardinal Sadoletto (1539), one of the brilliant defenses of the Reformation, Calvin penned these words: “There is nothing more perilous to our salvation than a preposterous and perverse worship of God.”<sup>11</sup> Calvin took worship very seriously. He wrote that Christ’s disciples are never “to frame any new

worship of God for themselves at random, and after their own pleasure, but to know that the only legitimate worship is that which he himself approved from the beginning.”<sup>12</sup>

This helps us to see why Calvin throughout his pastoral ministry was so animated about the importance of worshipping God according to his revealed will in Scripture. He was not being a cranky Frenchman, or a rigorist, or giving vent to a dyspeptic temperament. He was being a God-loving pastor who wanted the best for God and who believed that his flock’s good depended precisely on that happening.

Although the phrase “Regulative Principle” does not appear in Calvin’s writings, the idea is pervasive:

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God.<sup>13</sup>

Calvin, however, understood that not all Reformed Christians would interpret the ‘regulative principle’ identically. He also appreciated that times change and cultures change. So, at the conclusion of his discussion in *The Institutes*, he wrote, ‘let love be our guide and all will be safe.’<sup>14</sup> This was not an excuse for churches to do their own thing. It was a recognition that not everyone committed to ‘the regulative principle’ would see things the same way. Christians should respect fellow believers, committed to the same conviction about worship’ when they differed as to how that principle was to be practiced in the church.

Fourth, Calvin’s pastoral ministry reflected the servant spirit of the church’s Chief Pastor. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 4:5b, “and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake,” Calvin wrote:

all pastors ... are nothing more than the servants of believers, and ... they cannot serve Christ without serving his Church at the same time ... Hence it is part of a good pastor, not merely to keep aloof from all desire of domineering, but to regard it as the highest pitch

9. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIII, 289.

10. Calvin, *Tracts*, 1.126.

11. Calvin, *Tracts*, 1.34.

12. Calvin, *Tracts*, 1.34.

13. Calvin, *Tracts*, 1.128–129.

14. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.10.30.

of honour, at which he aspires—that he may serve the people of God.

God's people are kings and priests to God and pastors are their servants for Jesus' sake. Think of Jesus' words, 'I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27; Mark 10:45; John 13:1ff). Is anything more unbecoming a minister of the Servant-King than an unwillingness to stoop down and serve Christ's sheep, yes, even and especially in their stubbornness, thoughtlessness and perversity? Nothing more commends the pastoral office than Christ-like servanthood. Something of that spirit is seen in the letter Calvin wrote shortly after he had been exiled from Geneva. He had been treated badly and yet he wrote,

Here, therefore, with the most fervent salutation written by my own hand, do I supplicate the Lord Jesus, that he may protect you in his holy fortress of defence; that he may heap on you his gifts more and more; that he may restore your Church to due order, and specially, that he may fill you with his own spirit of gentleness, so that in the true conjunction of soul we may every one bestow ourselves in the promoting of his kingdom. Your most devoted, servant J.C.<sup>16</sup>

Fifth, Calvin's pastoral ministry was founded upon his conviction that the preaching and teaching of the gospel was God's principal means for ministering to the needs of his people. In John 10, Calvin sees Christ set forth as 'the only Governor of his church, its 'only Shepherd',<sup>17</sup> because it is he who feeds and governs his sheep and is himself "the only true food of the soul" (on John 21:15).<sup>18</sup> So, Calvin argues, "Those men... are reckoned to be Pastors in the sight of God, who govern the Church by the ministry of the word under Christ, who is their Head" (on John 21:15).<sup>19</sup> As a pastor, Calvin literally immersed himself in preaching, teaching and teaching. I know this is Christianity 101, but we cannot be reminded too often that the ministry of the word of God has first claim upon the time and energies of men set apart to shepherd Christ's flock. It is only too easy in the ministry to become a "potterer," to be a jack of all trades and master

of none. Paul's farewell words to Timothy should stand sentinel over every pastor worthy of the name, "Preach the word, in good times and in bad times" (2 Timothy 4:2, my translation).

Nicolas Colladon records the comprehensive and exhaustive nature of Calvin's pastoral/preaching ministry:

Calvin for his part did not spare himself at all, working far beyond what his powers and regard for his health could stand. He preached commonly every day for one week in two. Every week he lectured three times in theology. He was at the Consistoire on the appointed day and made all the remonstrances. Every Friday at the Bible Study which we call the Congregation, what he added after the leader had made his declaration was almost a lecture. He never failed in visiting the sick, in private warning and counsel, and the rest of the numberless matters arising out of the ordinary exercise of his ministry... Yet all that did not prevent him from going on working at his special study and composing many splendid and useful books.<sup>20</sup>

Few pastors have the remarkable gifts that Calvin had. But every pastor is called to devote the best of his time and energy to preparation, preaching, teaching, feeding the flock. Are you?

Let me mention one particular feature of Calvin's pastoral preaching. He was persuaded that, "Whenever God speaks to all his people in the body, he addresses himself to each individual" (on Psalm 125:2).<sup>21</sup> Preaching is addressing "individuals", not merely "types." If this is right, then pastors need to know the individuals in their churches as real flesh and blood men and women, boys and girls. Pastors need to know the people they are called to shepherd so that they can direct God's Word, by his Spirit, to their particular needs! This is why:

Sixth, Calvin's pastoral ministry emphasized the importance of pastoral visitation. He believed that Paul gave the church's pastors a pattern to follow when he visited "publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20):

For Christ hath not appointed pastors upon this condition, that they may only teach the Church in general in the open pulpit; but that they may take charge of every particular sheep, that they may bring back to the sheepfold those which wander and go astray, that they may strengthen those which are discouraged and weak, that they may cure the sick, that they may lift up and set on foot the feeble, (Ezekiel 34:4) for common

15. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XX, 198–199.

16. Calvin, *Tracts*, 4.149.

17. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIII, 401; see also XVIII, 289–290.

18. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIII, 290.

19. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XVIII, 290.

20. Quoted in T.H.L.Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (T and T Clark International, 1992), 62. Quoted from Theodore Beza's *Life of Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, 1.xxxix.

21. Calvin, *Commentaries*, VI, 90.

doctrine will oftentimes wax cold, unless it be holpen (strengthened) with private admonitions.<sup>22</sup>

But Calvin had no less strong words for those who refused “private admonitions” from their pastors: “For they be rather bears than sheep, who do not vouchsafe to hear the voice of their pastor, unless he be in the pulpit; and cannot abide to be admonished and reprovèd at home, yea, do furiously refuse that necessary duty.”<sup>23</sup> If there is truth in what Calvin says, open-hearted reception of the pastor’s ministry will only ever happen when their people have come to know in some measure their hearts. Congregations need to see and feel, as well as hear, that their pastors love them and seek God’s best for them. That never happens when Christ’s ministers are remote, distant, or ensconced in their studies!

Seventh, Calvin the pastor never wearied of telling his congregation to get out of themselves and into Christ. In *The Institutes* he writes, “We have taught that the sinner does not dwell upon his own compunction or tears, but fixes both eyes upon the Lord’s mercy alone.”<sup>24</sup> Calvin is always pleading with his people to look away to Christ. In October, 1555, he wrote to “The Five Prisoners at Chambery”: “If you feel in yourselves too much infirmity, have recourse to him who has every virtue in his hand.”<sup>25</sup> In an earlier letter to them (September 5, 1555), Calvin wrote, “the main point is to collect all your thoughts in order to repose in his paternal goodness.”<sup>26</sup> Is this not the burden of pastoral ministry, to point our people away from themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ? Robert Murray McCheyne expressed the point well, “For every one look at self take ten looks to Christ.”

Eighth, Calvin’s pastoral heart is seen in his instinctive ecumenism. This commitment to godly ecumenism is seen in his justly famous letter to Archbishop Cranmer:

This other thing also is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, viz., that the churches are so divided, that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute among us, far less that Christian intercourse which all make a profession of, but few sincerely practise.... Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding. So much does this concern me, that, could I be of any service, I would not grudge to cross even ten seas, if need were, on account of it.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin concludes his letter, “Adieu, very distinguished Archbishop, deserving of my hearty reverence. May the Lord continue to guide you by his Spirit, and to bless your holy labours.”

This deep concern for the visible unity of Christ’s church is replicated in the writings of men with impeccable Reformed credentials:

Thomas Brooks: “Labour mightily for a healing spirit. Away with all discriminating names whatever that may hinder the applying of balm to heal your wounds... Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous.”<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Watson, “There is but one God, and they that serve him should be one. There is nothing that would render the true religion more lovely, or make more proselytes to it, than to see the possessors of it tied together with the heart-strings of love.”<sup>29</sup>

John Murray,

the lack of unity among the churches of Christ which profess the faith in its purity is a patent violation of the unity of the body of Christ, and of that unity which the prayer of our Lord requires us to promote. We cannot escape from the implications for us by resorting to the notion of the invisible church. The body of Christ is not an invisible entity, and the prayer of Jesus was directed to the end that the world might believe. The unity prayed for was one that would bear witness to the world, and therefore belonged to the realm of the observable. The implications for visible confession and witness are unavoidable.<sup>30</sup>

Murray is not advocating doctrine-less Christian unity, but he is giving expression to something that Christians in general and pastors in particular only too rarely give any thought to.

#### CONCLUSION

John Calvin was a flawed but greatly used minister of the gospel. He has left us a shining example of God-honouring pastoral ministry. This example speaks first to pastors. It challenges us to be men who give themselves

*Continued on Page 253.*

22. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XIX, 244.

23. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XIX, 244.

24. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.3.

25. Calvin, *Tracts*, 6.231.

26. Calvin, *Tracts*, 6.221–222.

27. Calvin, *Tracts*, 5.347–348.

28. Thomas Brooks, quoted in I.D.E. Thomas, *A Puritan Golden Treasury* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), 304.

29. Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), Chapter 11, “The Unity of God,” 107–108.

30. *The Works of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2.335.

**Editorial. Continued from Page 2.**

Glasgow cathedral Kirk. For *In Translatione*, we continue our custom of presenting short to medium length first time translations into English of material of interest to Confessional Presbyterians. This year's entry is a translation by David C. Noe of two important letters which John Calvin wrote to the ministers of the Reformed church in Montbéliard. The church there was facing the forced imposition of Lutheran worship practices by the civil authorities, including the reinstatement of a number of the old holy days of the church calendar which that church had rejected at its founding. A helpful background introduction covering Calvin's view of such observances is provided by Chris Coldwell.

Worship is the most important thing a Christian does. If the Reformation was only about reforming our doctrine of justification—as absolutely important as that is—then the Reformation would only have been a whiff rather than a raging firestorm that spread through Europe and beyond, changing the world forever. But Dr. Old has taught us that real and abiding significance of the Reformation takes place in our worship services. In a day and age of fog machines, praise bands and offertory ballet performances, that is no insignificant thing. For these reasons the editors of *The Confessional Presbyterian* journal are happy to present this issue in honor of 500 years of being Reformed according to the Scriptures.

THE EDITORS ■

**Calvin the Pastor. Continued from Page 49.**

to shepherding the flock. Pastors are not CEOs, they are under shepherds in the flock of Christ. Like Christ himself, every pastor should be able to say, 'I know my own (sheep) and my own know me' (John 10:14). Our Lord Jesus Christ knows his sheep 'by name' (John 10:3) and no less should the under shepherds he has appointed know the sheep he has committed to their care.

Calvin's example also speaks to the church's theological teachers. Is it possible for men who have never been proven pastor-teachers to help teach and mold men preparing for the gospel ministry? Calvin and his fellow Reformers were pastor-theologians. They ministered week by week in the churches committed to their care. Their theology was formed from the word of God and forged in the pastoral crucible of the church. This is why, if I can speak for myself, I would not have pastoral theology as a separate theological locus in a Seminary. Every subject, OT, NT, biblical languages, systematic and biblical theology and church history, should be taught pastorally, by proven pastors. I have little doubt these last few words will generate a measure of discussion and debate! ■

**Less Outward Glory. Continued from Page 128.**

## KREEFT'S CHALLENGE AND CONCLUSION

Much more needs to be examined, including the rest of Calvin's writings on worship, an examination of more passages from his commentaries, and a more thorough examination of the entirety of the *Institutes* on the topic of worship. We have learned, though, that throughout his writings he makes clear that he believed the reformation of worship in the church to be essential. He found this on the basis of Scripture as well as looking back on the early church. One could say that no stone was left unturned as the Reformers sought to bring all things under the authority of God's Word. However, what do we make of Kreeft's challenge? Is it the case that, exegesis and history notwithstanding, the Reformers missed something? Do the transcendentals go together such that something cannot possibly be truly beautiful and false? Can something have the appearance of beauty but, at the same time, be evil?

What Kreeft seems to overlook is the fact that there is a clear Scriptural example where the good and the true are separated from the beautiful. Satan provides us with the answer to Kreeft's challenge. This is not overstating the case. To the contrary, Scripture presents him as one who was the most beautiful of God's creation, a guardian cherub (Ezekiel 28:12–18). Paul speaks of Satan as one who can even now disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). Far from necessitating that the good, true, and beautiful always go together, the person of Satan shows that something can be presented as beautiful—exceedingly so—and yet be full of evil and lack all truth. Indeed, Scripture and history prove to us that the mind of man is always looking for ways to add to the commands of God. This is why worship must always be reformed, according to Scripture. ■

**Family Religion: Adoption in the Reformation Tradition An Essential Element of the Gospel Message. Continued from Page 166.**

While we are still servant-subjects in the kingdom of God, we are even more sons of "our Father in heaven." It is fitting then to close with these words from John L. Girardeau: "The servant, with hat in hand, stands at a respectful distance awaiting the orders of his master; the child of God, as Luther has graphically suggested, rushes into the presence of his Father, leaps into his lap, and nestles in his bosom" (Girardeau, "Adoption," 493). Soli Deo Gloria!

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Thomas Boston. *The Complete Works of the Late Reverend*