

Books on Calvin in 2009

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IT IS NOT at all surprising that the John Calvin Quincentennial of this year has been attended not only by numerous conferences around the world, but also by a plethora of books on the French Reformer, far more than can be mentioned in a review essay like this. Given the number of these books, a basic rule for inclusion in this essay has been that the book actually appeared this

year, even though I will not treat all of the books published in 2009. There were a number that did come out in 2008 in anticipation of the quincentennial, but no comment has been passed on these.

BIOGRAPHIES OF CALVIN

In some ways, the most important of this variety of books is the biography by Bruce Gordon entitled simply *Calvin*.¹ Gordon, who is the professor of Reformation History at Yale, has written the magisterial biography of the Reformer for this gener-

ation, one that will well stand the test of time.

The research that lies behind the work is impressive. For instance, I do not recall ever having read that the mother tongue of John Calvin was not French—which he learned later in life—but Picard, a Romance language still spoken today in Picardy, in north-eastern France, where Calvin was born in 1509. As Gordon notes, Picard is close to but distinct from French.² Gordon not only knows well such details of Calvin's life, but he also understands the great themes that dominated his thought: the unity of the church around the Word of God, the proper worship of God, and the sovereignty of God over his entire creation, especially when it comes to the matter of salvation. He is balanced in treating matters that have long been used to disparage Calvin's name, such as the Servetus affair,³ yet he rightly refuses to whitewash Calvin's failings—his occasional outbursts of anger, at times “volcanic,” and his “soft spot” for European aristocracy, for example.⁴ Gordon's biography is a must-read for anyone who desires a detailed and scholarly, yet easily readable, overview of Calvin's life.

Other biographies that have appeared this year include one by Herman J. Selderhuis, professor of church history and church polity at the Theological University Apeldoorn in the Netherlands,⁵ and a popular study by Robert Godfrey, the president of

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Westminster Seminary California.⁶ Both of these biographies focus to some degree on the theme of pilgrimage, certainly a central feature of the Reformer's thought and one that grew out of his own status as a religious refugee.⁷ While Selderhuis also traces the life of Calvin through various images—Calvin the preacher or the soldier, for example—Godfrey particularly focuses on elements of Calvin's pastoral ministry, such as Calvin's thinking about the church or about predestination. I found Godfrey a much more satisfying study, even though generally the territory he covers is familiar ground to anyone moderately acquainted with Calvin's life. Selderhuis is a widely recognized scholar on Calvin—his study of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms is a gem, for instance⁸—but his biography has a slight acerbity. Commenting on Calvin's views about courtship, for example, Selderhuis notes that Calvin emphasized that there was to be “no sexy clothing; no make-up ... no going out without chaperones; no bathing or swimming together; and, of course, no sexual intercourse.” What could they do? Well, Selderhuis remarks, precious little except to “read the *Institutes* together!”⁹

Two other small biographical studies deserve mention. The first is part of the Day One “Travel with” series. These are visually stunning, compact studies of various church history figures, replete with photographs and maps, designed to facilitate travelling to the area associated with the subject of the book. Running through each of them is a solid biographical account. In the case of *Travel with John Calvin*, the author is Kenneth Brownell, who has earned a Ph.D. in modern history from the University of St. Andrews and who is currently the pastor of the historic East London Tabernacle Baptist Church in London, U.K. Brownell gives a first reader of Calvin's works a succinct study of his life and thought which hits all of the key points—things such as his friendships with Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret, and his passion for the reform of the church in France¹⁰—as well as a final chapter that clearly shows the massive influence Calvin has had on western society.¹¹

The other biographical study is by John Piper, the well-known and prolific pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is a very brief book—nine thousand words or so, a scant forty pages—and can be read in an hour and a half at most. Although Piper's doctorate was in New Testament, he has devoted time each year to studying and then delivering a lecture on a person from church history at his annual pastors' conference. Usually these biographical studies¹² (which is how this slim book on Calvin began) look at a key theme in the subject's life. In Calvin's case, Piper chose to focus on his “passion for the majesty of God.” As Piper rightly notes, Calvin was “a man utterly devoted to displaying the majesty of God,” and that primarily through the exposition of God's Word.¹³

One final book that falls into the category of biographical studies of Calvin is Machiel A. van den Berg's *Friends of Calvin*.¹⁴ John Calvin's delight in and dependence on a number of close friends has long been known to Calvin scholars, but this new work by a Dutch Reformed pastor provides an easily accessible study of this crucial aspect of the life of the French Reformer. In a word, this book is a gem. It reads well, is rooted in solid scholarship, and contains much that is fascinating. Some friends, like his ministerial co-workers, Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret, are familiar to most who have read a little about Calvin's life. Other friendships, like that with the Dutch couple Lord and Lady de Falais, are much less known. All of them reveal how significant these friendships were for the European Reformation and for Calvin's own personal spiritual maturity. Reading these delightful sketches it is evident that what gave these friendships a depth unmatched by many friendships of our day was the conviction that these relationships were God-wrought and eternal. As Calvin wrote to Philip Melancthon in a classic description of the nature of Christian friendship, “The distance in place cannot prevent us—content with the bond that Christ has established through his blood and has enclosed in our hearts through his Spirit—from holding on to the hope ... that

we will in the end live together eternally and in eternal enjoyment of our love and friendship.”¹⁵

CALVIN’S IDEAS

Turning now to the study of Calvin’s ideas, probably the best place to begin is Herman Selderhuis’ *The Calvin Handbook*, which functions as a comprehensive dictionary of Calvin’s life and thought and which well reveals the current state of research on Calvin.¹⁶ There are tremendous resources here, such as John Witte, Jr.’s study of Calvin on “Marriage and Family Life” or Arie Baars’ examination of Calvin’s teaching on “The Trinity.”¹⁷ What makes this book so valuable is that each of the areas examined is written by a published and recognized Calvin scholar. This will be an invaluable reference work for anyone seeking to get brief, but substantial, studies of the many facets of Calvin’s thinking.

Another noteworthy collection of academic studies on Calvin is Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallmann, eds., *John Calvin’s Impact on Church and Society, 1509–2009*.¹⁸ The twelve essays in this ground-breaking volume examine the Reformer’s impact on areas of the world like the Swiss Confederation and North America, as well as probing the main principles of his theology and his thought on topics such as ethics, capitalism, and religious tolerance. Although the twelve essays in the volume are based on current research and are first-class academic studies, a number of them largely dispense with the scholarly apparatus of documentation. A substantial bibliography is provided in the place of footnotes.

One critical area of Calvin’s thought has to do with his political philosophy, which has been wrongly lampooned on occasion as little better than the advocacy of a theocratic police state. An excellent corrective to this wrong thinking has been provided by Mark Larson, a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church with a Ph.D. in historical theology from Calvin Theological Seminary, where his doctoral supervisor was Richard Muller, the renowned expert in Reformed thought. In his monograph *Calvin’s Doctrine of the State*, Larson

especially outlines Calvin’s thinking about war and the principles by which a state wages a just war, a timely topic indeed.¹⁹ As in a number of the studies already mentioned, Larson reminds us that Calvin was a man of his time and that in some areas of his political thought he was still operating from within a medieval mindset. This is especially so, Larson insists, with regard to Calvin’s involvement in the Servetus affair.²⁰ What Larson does conclusively demonstrate is that Calvin was firmly opposed to the concept of holy war, an achievement that was vital in the development of the modern democratic state.

The most important source for Calvin’s ideas remains his theological *magnum opus*, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (5th Latin ed., 1559), though it would be a mistake to suppose that one can grasp the totality of Calvin’s thought by simply absorbing the final edition of this remarkable work. Calvin’s commentaries, sermons, treatises, catechisms, and correspondence reveal other aspects and nuances of his thinking that must be taken into account in any reflection on the entirety of his written corpus.²¹ Having said that, reading and understanding the *Institutes* is vital for anyone studying Calvin and his times and the larger historical impact of Calvin’s written work. It was on the basis of this work that Philip Melancthon dubbed Calvin “the theologian.”²² Helping work through the structure of his thought in the *Institutes* is now Anthony Lane’s *A Reader’s Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*.²³ Lane is an internationally-known Calvin scholar who, among other things, helped produce a very fine abridgement and modernization of Calvin’s *Institutes* in the late 1980s.²⁴ This more recent work is based to some extent on that previous endeavor.²⁵ Lane also provides an excellent introduction to the history of the publication of the *Institutes* in both its Latin and French versions.²⁶ The first edition appeared in 1536 (published in Basel), and in Calvin’s *Opera selecta* it occupies 243 pages. The second edition (Strasbourg, 1539) is three times as large and the final edition (Geneva, 1559), which is the

fifth edition—there were editions also in 1543, again published in Strasbourg, and in 1550 (also reprinted in 1553 by Robert Estienne and again in 1554)—is almost five times larger than the first edition. He also translated the 1539 Latin edition of the *Institutes* into French in 1541 (Geneva on the press of Jean Girard), and supervised the translation of three later French translations (1545, 1551, 1560). The final Latin edition of the *Institutes* is approximately five times the length of the first edition, a significant fact that betrays an essential characteristic of Calvin the theologian: his teachability.

The English translation of the title *Institutio Christianae Religionis* may not be the best translation from the original Latin. The Latin word *religio* at the time did not have its modern rendition as “religion.” *Religio* comes from the Latin verb *religare* “to bind” and used in a theological sense would mean the bond that unites humans to God, as exemplified in the late medieval period by the monastic vow. The phrase *Christianae religionis* then would indicate the “Christian bond” to God or Christian piety or even the Christian life. The Latin word *institutio* can mean *arrangement, custom, introduction, or education*. A more accurate English title might then be *Introduction to Christian Piety*. Though this author has no expectation that this suggestion would be taken up, it does help us see how important piety was for Calvin.

PIETY AND PASTORALIA

An excellent introduction to the important place that spirituality had in the Reformer’s life is provided by Joel Beeke’s “*The Soul of Life*”: *The Piety of John Calvin*.²⁷ Beeke, president and professor of Systematic Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, has done extensive research into Calvin’s piety and this representative selection of texts dealing with piety is the fruit of his close work in this area. After a lengthy introduction that details Calvin’s life and the main areas of his spirituality, Beeke presents forty-five extracts from the writings of the French-

man that give an excellent introduction to the contours of Calvin’s piety, a piety that would shape many disciples of Christ in the centuries to follow.

One final work that bears mentioning is another slim volume consisting of four chapters, Victor Shepherd’s *A Ministry Dearer Than Life: The Pastoral Legacy of John Calvin*.²⁸ Shepherd is professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto. His doctoral dissertation was on Calvin’s understanding of faith,²⁹ and he has done extensive study of Calvin in lectures since then. This recent series of studies has a small sketch of Calvin’s life, a study of Calvin’s thinking about prayer (which comprises the second longest section of his *Institutes*), a chapter entitled “My Ministry is Dearer To Me Than My Own Life,” and a study of Calvin’s tract, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543). The third chapter is especially powerful. It was originally delivered as an address in Toronto at the annual meeting of the Centre for Mentorship and Theological Reflection, which this reviewer attended. He remembers being struck with the power of the address at the time, which explored Calvin’s understanding of the calling of the pastoral office in light of his statement, “My ministry is dearer to me than my own life.” It is good to see this address in print, and to be reminded afresh of the cost of Christian discipleship as it relates to the pastoral office. It was a cost that can be seen writ large in Calvin’s own sufferings and yet one that he rejoiced in, for it brought glory to the God who had saved him.

ENDNOTES

¹Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009).

²Gordon, *Calvin*, 4.

³Gordon, *Calvin*, 217–32.

⁴Gordon, *Calvin*, 281–82.

⁵Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim’s Life* (trans. Albert Gootjes; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2009).

- ⁶Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009).
- ⁷See especially Selderhuis, *A Pilgrim's Life*, 34–109; and Godfrey, *Pilgrim and Pastor*, 13–53.
- ⁸Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).
- ⁹Selderhuis, *A Pilgrim's Life*, 181.
- ¹⁰Kenneth Brownell, *Travel with John Calvin* (Leominster, England: Day One Publications, 2009), 37–41, 100.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 109–21.
- ¹²For Piper's other biographical studies, see online: http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex/42_Christian_Biography [cited 15 Dec 2009].
- ¹³John Piper, *John Calvin and His Passion for the Majesty of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 27.
- ¹⁴Machiel A. van den Berg, *Friends of Calvin* (trans. Reinder Bruinsma; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).
- ¹⁵van den Berg, *Friends of Calvin*, ix.
- ¹⁶Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *The Calvin Handbook* (trans. Henry J. Baron, Judith J. Guder, Randi H. Lundell, and Gerrit W. Sheeres; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, 455–65, 245–57.
- ¹⁸Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallmann, eds., *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society, 1509–2009* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
- ¹⁹Mark J. Larson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the State: A Reformed Doctrine and Its American Trajectory, The Revolutionary War, and the Founding of the Republic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).
- ²⁰Larson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the State*, 82–88.
- ²¹For a 2009 reprint of a selection of his correspondence and an important selection of his treatises, see the seven-volume edition of Calvin's *Tracts and Letters* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009).
- ²²I. John Hesselink, "Calvin's theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 74.
- ²³Anthony N. S. Lane, *A Reader's Guide to Calvin's Institutes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).
- ²⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; ed. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).
- ²⁵Lane, *Reader's Guide*, 19, n.18.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, 16–19.
- ²⁷Joel Beeke, "*The Soul of Life*": *The Piety of John Calvin* (Profiles in Reformed Spirituality; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).
- ²⁸Victor Shepherd, *A Ministry Dearer Than Life: The Pastoral Legacy of John Calvin* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2009).
- ²⁹Victor Shepherd, *The Nature and Function of Faith in Theology of John Calvin* (Dissertation Series, no.2; Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1983).