

In his conclusion de Gruchy wishes to affirm—as Calvin would have, were he alive, he argues—a “critical ‘African humanism’”: “By ‘critical’ is meant a humanism that is more chastened and sober than that which characterized the liberal secular humanism that arose out of the Enlightenment. By ‘African humanism’ is meant a social humanism that embodies relationality as central” (p. 229). De Gruchy writes, “We should affirm this, it is in continuity with Calvin’s legacy. In renewing contact with Calvin and Christian humanism, it can be in touch with the real human predicament, our fallenness, but also the hope we have in Christ” (p. 229).

Despite its over-reliance on older Reformation scholarship and the clear indebtedness to certain categories of modern Reformed theology that might not helpfully explain Calvin, this work does have a place. No doubt, in the few years between the five hundredth birthday of Calvin and the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, there have been many other studies of the Reformation, Calvin, and Reformed theology that have a much more nuanced grasp of Renaissance and Reformation scholarship. Yet, read as a kind of testimonial about how one theologian in the Reformed tradition reclaimed a helpful reading of Calvin—despite a good deal of pressure to jettison that part of his tradition—this volume is worth reading.

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Bruce Gordon. *Calvin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. Pp. xvi + 398.

I was walking through the streets of Paris in 2009 during the flurry of conferences on John Calvin in celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of his birth. As was my habit, I wandered into a number of bookstores for the joy of browsing. Much to my surprise I found shelves full of works by or about Calvin—not only the classics, including, foremost, the *Institutes*, but fresh biographies by scholars not known to be personally Calvinists, such as Bernard Cottret and Olivier Millet, and even specialized studies on his sermons and his political views—all were apparently selling quite well. What had provoked this outbreak of interest?

Heretofore Calvin has been either ignored or disdained. The school I attended in Paris as a boy in the 1950s prided itself on the glories of French literature. The great classic textbook all of us used, Lagarde et Michard,

contains a fine volume on the sixteenth century. It features Clément Marot, Rabelais, Du Bellay, Ronsard, Montaigne, etc., but there are only two pages on Calvin (*le pape de Genève*), which briefly, and predictably, cite the sections in the *Institutes* on faith, depravity, and predestination. Suddenly, in the twenty-first century, he is in every bookstore. Most of the reasons for this are not strictly theological. In this Roman Catholic-turned-secular country, the new attraction to Calvin stems no doubt from the sudden realization that he was French, not Swiss! Certainly, also, he was one of the pioneers of modern French: his prose in the language and that of Blaise Pascal a century later are recognized as being eloquent, succinct, and clear in a way in which Rabelais and Montaigne were incapable. Indeed, as Bruce Gordon relates, Calvin's Latin was more than fluent, but when he took pains to translate himself into French, he was able to write in a way that respected the linguistic contours of his audience's tongue. Also, French people had been becoming more and more aware of the message of the Huguenots and the tragedy of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1698), which delayed modernization and principled pluralism for decades.

Who was this John Calvin, born Jean Cauvin (1509–1564)? At Harvard University, many years ago, I took the standard “Ren and Ref” course on the Renaissance and the Reformation. The new outlooks on the Renaissance by Wallace Ferguson and on the Reformation by Heiko Oberman, who was at Harvard at the time, were in the air. I clearly remember Oberman saying of Calvin, “He was the greatest mind of his or any era, but I quite hate everything he stood for!” Calvin was already despised in his own time by the likes of the Savoyard humanist Sebastian Castellio, the Carmelite friar Jérôme-Hermès Bolsec, and, of course, the infamous medical doctor Michael Servetus. The hostile biography by Bolsec, who confused Calvin's view of predestination with fatalism, and one even more hostile by Calvin's former secretary François Baudin, who accused his former master of being a monster, had impacts lasting into our own day. The imposing art deco militaristic image of Calvin on the Reformation Wall (1909) in the Parc des Bastions does not help.

The many recent biographies of Calvin are a great advance in determining the best overall assessment of the Genevan Reformer and his work. Among them none is more thorough, more considered, and more illuminating, than Gordon's Calvin. Gordon is extremely meticulous, leaving few factual stones unturned. He is also appropriately cautious. In sharp contrast to what is known of Calvin's German predecessor Martin Luther, we know next to nothing about Calvin's conversion, and Gordon does not speculate. Calvin left us only two accounts, the one as an aside in the *Letter to Sadoleto*,

where he remembers his torment before the prospect of divine judgment, and the other in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms (1557), where he likens himself to one of the prophets called to serve God. But some of the clearest hints of the nature of his conversion, Gordon suggests, are found in various remarks in his writings on the theme of the journey, specifically the journey from exile to union with God (p. 57).

What Gordon does particularly well is place Calvin and the Genevan Reformation within the larger context of what was happening in Europe, especially in Germany, France, and cities such as Strasbourg, Bern, and Basel. Since the present issue of *Unio* is devoted to Desiderius Erasmus, we might point out that the humanist scholar from Rotterdam appears several times in this account of Calvin. For example, as Gordon notes, early on, the young scholar traveled to Basel, the center of modern printing, a city where Erasmus had a great presence (although it seems the two never met). The impact of humanism on Calvin from a master such as Erasmus is patent. Gordon maintains that Calvin's relation to the apostle Paul was shaped by the Renaissance understanding of imitation, channeled through Erasmus (p. 110). Despite these allusions there is no substantive discussion of Calvin's views on Erasmus. It would have been interesting, for example, to consider the influence of Erasmus's popular *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (1503), particularly his views of images, or his putative Platonism, on Calvin.

As a good social historian Gordon considers not only circumstantial issues but cultural ones. The Bernese, he argues, held an attitude of superiority over the "French" from Geneva and Lausanne, causing Calvin to become both defender and diplomat (p. 74). He portrays Calvin as an adept statesman who knew how to bring other Reformers from different cities and different horizons onto his side. There is a good deal of psychological interest in this biography as well. Although he rejects attempts to have Calvin lie down on the therapist's couch, Gordon spends considerable time, in various places, commenting on his character. Some of his findings should go a long way toward dispelling the bromides about the irascible dictator of Geneva. By his own lights Calvin was quite timid, yet he was so dedicated to his cause that he could become bold when the situation called for it. He had a temper, as everyone knows. He had to apologize on more than one occasion for his rudeness and incivility (p. 91). He could be harsh on dissidents, but never harsher than on himself.

At the same time, he made enduring friendships that stood the test of various tensions and disagreements. He was deeply in love with his wife, Idelette, and leaned upon her more than we might expect of the stalwart

Genevan. He was cordial with Martin Bucer, but particularly close to Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret and then to Theodore Beza. His loyalty to them was not sentimental, but “framed by faithfulness to the cause of Christ’s Church” (p. 281). Such collegiality could be threatened when, in Calvin’s view, principle was at stake. For example, after some thirty-five years of close camaraderie with Farel, Calvin broke off relations when at age sixty-nine the senior missionary decided to marry a sixteen-year-old girl. An attempt was made at reconciliation just before Calvin died, but the damage was done. With Viret there was no abrupt breach, yet the two did develop disagreements, such as over the wisdom of entrusting the future leadership of the Genevan Reformation to Beza. These rifts were deeply hurtful to Calvin, who, in Gordon’s account, turned to the Psalms for comfort (p. 285).

Calvin held strong views on what we might call foreign policy today. He had a great burden for his homeland. Gordon rightly attributes the growth of the Reformation in France to factors including but well beyond the influence of Luther. At first, Calvin was close to the group from Meaux and appreciative of the role of Marguerite de Navarre, Francis I’s sister. His concern for France was over its need for the gospel. He tried everything he could to protect persecuted believers, as in the famous case of the five students from Lyon (pp. 195–97). But he took issue with those Protestants who, he believed, dissembled their identity. Some of his strongest polemics were addressed against what he called the *Nicodemites*, named for the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night. He eventually had little sympathy for the group protected by Marguerite, which he thought to be lacking in courage. Some of Calvin’s critics deemed this a cheap shot, attacking so-called compromisers from the safety of Geneva (pp. 190–95). But it is well to remember that Calvin was truly French, and his call for separation was born out of theological convictions, not false security. Indeed, he was never quite at home in Geneva, was often at odds with its magistrates, and only became a citizen in 1559. This made his consistent pleas for receiving refugees all the more remarkable.

Some of the most compelling portions of Gordon’s account are on Calvin’s attempts at ecumenism. Though unity with the Lutherans on the question of the Lord’s Supper was a lost cause, Calvin did try to bring harmony among the Swiss Reformers. He was ultimately unsuccessful, owing to the ghost of Zwingli living on in the Bernese Reformers, who so feared a return to Catholicism they belittled the real presence of Christ in the sacraments (p. 164). A sort of agreement was reached, with the *Consensus Tigurinus* (1551), but it never garnered the full support of all

the Bernese. Though a milestone, the agreement fell far short of what Calvin had hoped for (p. 180). Why was the Lord's Supper such a critical issue in the sixteenth century? As Gordon explains, not only was it the bone of contention in the dispute over the Mass, but it represented the very heart of Christian worship, the *verbum visibile*, along with the Word itself, the gospel preached and embraced.

Gordon is a historian, not a theologian. This is not, of course, a defect, but it does explain why throughout the book it is the historical circumstances, the personalities, and the relationships that are of major interest, not so much the doctrinal issues. Church government, city administration, the model of Strasbourg, discipline, book printing, and the like are well handled in these pages. And, since doctrine never arises outside of a context, getting the context right is of crucial importance. Gordon does take a stab at identifying the center of Calvin's theology. "The core of Christianity was the proper worship of God," he says of Calvin's approach, explaining why he was such a sharp critic of people he considered lukewarm (p. 195). Calvin was concerned for the glory of God, which is why he replies to Sadoletto that faith, or free access, is all important. But Gordon does not explore the fine points of Calvin's theological arguments against Sadoletto, or his remarkable exercise of the art of persuasion. Calvin's preaching is recognized, but there is little on the elements of his style. An entire chapter is spent on Calvin's commentary on Romans, and some of its content is helpfully covered, but there is nothing, for example, on justification by faith.

Reading this splendid biography, I was struck by the number of issues faced by Calvin that have become urgent concerns today. (1) Church unity: how may we exhibit the communion of the saints while we differ on secondary issues? (2) Separation: if we stay within a larger, mainline denomination are we compromising the gospel? (3) Facing persecution: when should we stand up and be counted? (4) Church and state: where do the legitimate authority of the one and the limits of the other collide? (5) The authority of the Bible: is it the Word of God, or does it only contain the Word of God? The Calvin that emerges from these excellent pages is the "man for all seasons," an epithet far better deserved by him than by Thomas More.

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