

MICHAEL HORTON



CALVIN

on the Christian Life

GLORIFYING AND ENJOYING GOD FOREVER

“Be warned. This looks like a book on how Calvin thought about living the Christian life. But open it and you will discover that Mike Horton is driving you on a grand Calvin tour of the whole of theology. And that, of course, is Professor Horton’s (and John Calvin’s) point: it takes the whole biblical gospel to make a whole Christian life. By employing the classical formulation of the two natures of Christ (‘distinct but not separate’), Dr. Horton provides readers with a key to help unlock Calvin’s teaching. But more than that, he shows why the Genevan Reformer’s vision of the Christian life remains unsurpassed. Thoroughly satisfying, thoroughly enjoyable, and thoroughly recommended.”

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“Learned and lucid, masterfully organized and vigorously expressed, this full, solid, and exact study of Geneva’s reforming pastor is an outstanding piece of work. In all four sections Calvin comes to vigorous life. Calvin’s reputation for godly wisdom, and Horton’s for vivid writing, will certainly be enhanced.”

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“*Calvin on the Christian Life* provides an amazingly personal and comprehensive portrait of the Reformer’s passions and positions, constantly connecting them to issues of belief and practice in our day. Far more than a synthesis of Calvin’s thought and practice, this book provides readers with an intimate glimpse into his private piety.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher; author, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* Bible study series

“Scholar and pastor Michael Horton has provided us with a well-researched introduction to John Calvin’s doctrine of *piety*—Calvin’s word for the reverence and love that the gospel produces in all our relationships. One of the most intriguing aspects of Horton’s book is the way he traces the theme of ‘distinction without separation’ through the Christian life, whether with respect to the two natures of Christ, grace and the sacraments, or church and state. This book will enlighten beginners and refresh and challenge veterans in the field.”

Joel R. Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Using the most recent Reformation research, as well as letting the sources speak for themselves, Michael Horton has given us a wonderful overview of how John Calvin saw the life of the Christian. The book demonstrates the open attitude Calvin had toward living in this world and does away with the caricatures that still surround this Reformer. Horton’s book is both academic and practical—a rare but very welcome combination.”

Herman Selderhuis, Director, Refo500; President, The International Calvin Congress

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CHAPTER I

CALVIN ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: AN INTRODUCTION

“The spirituality of John Calvin is seldom examined.”¹ There are notable exceptions to this verdict by Howard Hageman. Yet it seems generally true that even those who consult Calvin on theological or exegetical questions may be inclined to look elsewhere for spiritual direction. I suspect that a principal reason for this oversight has to do with what we mean by “spirituality.”

A Different Time

Once upon a time, daily rhythms were ordered by the tolling of the church bell and the annual cycle punctuated by the church calendar. People passed into the church to mark life’s milestones through rows of headstones. From baptisms to funerals, God’s presence was felt at least tacitly across the whole of life. Faith was a shared public frame of reference, not a private hobby of those who, in the words of modern theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, “have a talent for religion” or “a taste for the Infinite.” God’s hand was discerned in floods, fires, and plagues as well as in fruitful harvests. Of course, there were plenty of people for whom this was all unreflective

¹ Howard Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Frank C. Senn (New York: Paulist, 1986), 60.

gibberish more than genuine belief. However, no one assumed a world in which religion or spirituality was a corner of private life.

The Reformation and the Heart of the Matter

Whatever ways in which the Reformation anticipated the modern age, it belonged to the world shaped by Christendom. Especially for the Reformers and their successors, faith and reason, doctrine and life, sacred and secular were on speaking terms. It is striking to us in our contemporary context to discover the same theologian writing a sermon or a lecture, a poem on nature or a hymn to nature's Creator and Redeemer, a Hebrew or Greek grammar, and some calculations on planetary movements—in the same week. Truth, goodness, and beauty drew all disciplines together in a unified body of knowledge. No less when exploring the heavens than when poring over Scripture, one was engaging in pious meditation upon God's works.

It is difficult to justify the claim that the Reformation brought unalloyed blessing. Yet it is even more implausible to suggest, as some recent writers have, that it launched the drift toward secularism.² First, by various measurements it can be easily shown that late medieval Christendom was already coming apart at the seams. It was held together precariously but firmly by the vast network of magisterial power. Centuries of papal tyranny and abuses created widespread cynicism and provoked myriad reform movements. For a while “conciliarists”—urging papal submission to councils—gained the upper hand, but “papalists” finally won out.

An especially anxious moment came in the fourteenth century, when three popes claimed Peter's chair. Begun in 1309, the Western Schism (often called “the Babylonian Captivity”) was only concluded with the Council of Constance in 1417, a century before Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses. In 1987, before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained:

For nearly half a century, the Church was split into two or three obediences that excommunicated one another, so that every Catholic lived under excommunication by one pope or another, and, in the last analy-

² A recent example is University of Notre Dame historian Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). For a quite different interpretation, see Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

sis, no one could say with certainty which of the contenders had right on his side. The Church no longer offered certainty of salvation; she had become questionable in her whole objective form—the true Church, the true pledge of salvation, had to be sought outside the institution.³

At least from the perspective of the Reformers, this was only the tip of the iceberg. Satires of the Roman curia and the monks were common. Yet Reformers like Luther and Calvin went to the heart of the matter: the doctrine, and not just any doctrine, but the substance of the gospel message itself.

However, as the word *reformation* suggests, they did not set out to create a new church, nor did the movement become mired in mere critique. The aim was essentially constructive: namely, to re-evangelize Christendom.

First, the Reformation sparked a renewal of Christian piety by *deepening* it. In his preface to his Small Catechism, Luther expressed alarm at widespread biblical illiteracy. Yet more than a century earlier, University of Paris chancellor and theologian Jean Gerson wrote a treatise complaining that even many priests were ignorant of the basic message, figures, and plotline of Scripture. Going back to the sources to rediscover a lost treasure, those who embraced the Reformation were so deeply knowledgeable about it and invested in it that they were willing to die for it if necessary. Those who embraced the Reformation were convinced that they had truly understood the gospel of God's free grace in Christ for the first time.

The Reformation also ignited genuine piety by *widening* the circle. The monks and nuns engaged in full-time prayer and contemplation were called "the religious." Basically, they were surrogates, fulfilling spiritual disciplines on behalf of the secular layperson. Monks were often targets of the period's equivalent of stand-up comics. Yet the Reformers were troublesome not because they joined in mocking abuses, laziness, ignorance, and vice, but because they challenged the legitimacy of the monastic vocation itself.

While all roads led to the cathedral or local parish, the church's leaders felt obliged to issue edicts requiring attendance at Mass at least once a year. Even then, the average worshiper could not understand the liturgy enough to participate in it, and the Communion cup was withheld entirely

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 196.

from the laity. Sermons were rare, except when traveling (mendicant) preachers came to town. Essentially, the Mass was a spectacle—a sumptuously staged event that the people observed from afar, separated by a screen. It was becoming increasingly clear that at least on the street, the veneer of Christianity was peeling away to reveal a canvas of various native (pre-Christian) folk paganisms. As Cambridge historian Patrick Collinson concludes, the Reformation was an “episode of re-Christianization or even primary Christianization” that interrupted “a process of secularization with much deeper roots.”⁴

With the gospel as the fountain, believers now had full and equal access to God’s mercy through his means of grace. They heard the Word expounded in their own languages. The screen was removed, and the congregation participated in the public liturgy, receiving Communion—not only the bread, but also the cup, and frequently rather than once a year. Soon, even poorer saints obtained Bibles and brought their own Psalters to church, from which they sang in their daily chores on the farm and in the shop, as well as in their homes around the dinner table. It became so common for martyrs to spend their final time on earth singing God’s praises as they passed the watching crowds that the authorities resorted to cutting out martyrs’ tongues before they were escorted to the pyres.

Imitating the example of the ancient church, the Reformers produced catechisms. Teenage evangelicals—girls as well as boys—were more familiar with the content and rationale for their faith and practice than were many priests. In fact, the Catholic Counter-Reformation produced its own catechism and other means of instruction (including the Jesuit order) in an effort to stem the tide of conversion to evangelical faith and practice.

Breaking down the wall separating the monks in “full-time Christian service” from the average believer not only deepened and widened piety in public worship; it also entailed a liberating view of callings in the world. Even milking a cow to the glory of God and for the neighbor’s good was a spiritual activity.

John Calvin and Life *Coram Deo*

If the modern world was becoming more secular, this was the very opposite of Calvin’s piety. He was not a progressive anticipating the Enlighten-

⁴Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 199.

ment's autonomous individualism, but an evangelical humanist crying, "Back to the sources!" The faith he encouraged was deeper and wider than the popular piety of his day. Like any pious Augustinian, Calvin viewed every aspect of life *coram Deo*, before the face of God. Calvin would not have even comprehended the idea that is usually assumed in the word *spirituality* as we use it today: namely, as a private island of subjective and imaginative irrationality surrounded by a sea of objective and public reason.

"Piety" (*pietas*), not spirituality, is the Reformer's all-encompassing term for Christian faith and practice. Even this term has lost its value in modernity. We've learned to draw a line between doctrine and life, with "piety" (like "spirituality") falling on the "life" side of the ledger. The ancient church saw it differently: *eusebia* encompassed doctrine and life. It could be translated "piety" or "orthodoxy" without any confusion. Calvin assumed this overarching horizon. Doctrine, worship, and life are all of one piece. The doctrine is always practically oriented, and practice is always to be grounded in true doctrine. In fact, "justification by faith . . . is the sum of all piety."⁵ The root of piety is faith in the gospel. Love is the yardstick for all duties, and God's moral law in both Testaments stipulates the character of this love on the ground, comprehending "piety toward God" and "charity toward men."⁶ Calvin even defined his *Institutes* as "a sum of Christian piety."

If historical distance makes us work harder to understand Calvin's view of piety, it also forces us to appreciate the extent to which the Reformer himself would have been embarrassed to be singled out for a distinctive view of the Christian life. Indeed, the label Calvinist was coined in 1552 by Lutheran polemicist Joachim Westphal, and Calvin did not treat it as a term of endearment. As I point out in the next chapter, Calvin stood on the shoulders of giants from the past and fellow Reformers who helped shape many of his own views that are erroneously attributed to his unique genius.

In short, Calvin has been given too much blame by critics and too much credit by fans. His real genius is to be found in his remarkable ability to synthesize the best thought of the whole Christian tradition and sift it with rigorous exegetical skill and evangelical instincts. His rhetorical rule

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.15.7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.3.1; 3.3.16.

was “brevity and simplicity,” and this, combined with a heart enflamed by truth, draws us back to his wells for refreshment in many times and places—especially when we seem to have lost our way.

The Making of an Unlikely Reformer

In 1536, a red-headed preacher, Guillaume Farel, begged the young French author of a popular little book to stay in Geneva to help him complete the work of reformation in the church there. The author was Jean Calvin, and his book was the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, at that point a brief summary of the evangelical faith. Calvin reverently declined the honor, explaining that he only wanted to be left alone to pursue his scholarship. Unexpectedly, the fiery preacher who had led Geneva to embrace the Reformation threatened his timid fellow-Frenchman with God’s judgment on his studies if he should refuse God’s calling to assist with reformation where it was needed. Persuaded by Farel and a few others, Calvin agreed, but initially only to the post of Bible lecturer, to which was added soon thereafter regular preaching and pastoral duties.

Geneva was basically a client state of the Reformed city of Bern. After a year of pushing for greater independence of the church from Geneva’s magistrates (as well as Bern’s), Farel and Calvin—along with two other ministers—were sent packing. Calvin found a new home and ministry in Strasbourg, where the leading pastor, Martin Bucer, became a spiritual father. It was Bucer (along with Peter Martyr Vermigli) who would have a large impact on the course of the English Reformation, even helping Cranmer revise the Book of Common Prayer. Here in Strasbourg the Reformation was already established—precisely as the young Reformer would have hoped for Geneva. Calvin was pastor to five hundred French exiles and started a youth hostel with his new wife, Idelette. He participated in imperial conferences, completely revised the *Institutes* from six chapters to sixteen, and wrote his important Romans commentary. Finally, he felt that he had found a home.

Yet only three years after Calvin and his colleagues had been summarily dismissed from Geneva, an ambassador was dispatched to Calvin’s door with the official plea: “On behalf of our Small, Large, and General Councils . . . we beg you very affectionately to decide to come to us and return to your former place and ministry.”⁷ Happily ensconced in Strasbourg,

⁷ Quoted in Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.

Calvin “stated plainly that he would not return,” according to the biography written by his successor, Theodore Beza. To one close friend he confided, “Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over.”⁸

The Genevans recruited Bucer to their cause. Tearing a page out of Farel’s playbook, Bucer “appealed to the example of Jonah” to encourage Calvin to return to his former post.⁹ Calvin mourned the prospect of returning to Geneva—“not because I have hated it,” he told Pierre Viret, “but because I see so many difficulties presented in that quarter which I do feel myself far from being equal to surmount.”¹⁰ He could at least stall the Genevans by writing from Germany that he still had important business to do for Strasbourg at these imperial meetings.¹¹ Yet, as he expressed to Farel, “When we come back, our friends here will not refuse their consent to my return to Geneva. Moreover, Bucer has pledged himself that he will accompany me.”¹²

Nothing seems to have been less agreeable to his frame. “But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord.”¹³ This motto is enshrined in Calvin’s crest: a hand holding up a heart.

A short time later, a lovely carriage arrived with the Genevan ambassador to transport Calvin and his new family back to Geneva, where he was greeted at the gates with a hero’s welcome. Entering the pulpit of St. Pierre’s once again the following Sunday, Calvin did not refer to his exile, rail against vicious enemies who still agitated against his return, or offer flattering speeches about the welcome that may have compensated for such an unseemly dismissal. He simply picked up preaching at the very verse at which he had left off when he had been asked to leave.

A Revealing Episode for Calvin’s Life and Ministry

This episode illumines Calvin’s wider life and ministry. First, it points up his shyness—and, at least in his own view, “cowardice”—in becoming

⁸T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* (Tring, UK: Lion, 1975), 96.

⁹Theodore Beza, “Life of Calvin,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:xxxvii.

¹⁰Calvin, “To Viret” (Ulm, March 1, 1541), in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 4:230. “I am so perplexed, or rather confused, as to the call from Geneva that I can scarce venture to think what I ought to do.”

¹¹This he did on two occasions, drafting nearly the same letter to the Genevan leadership. See Calvin, “To the Seigneurie of Geneva” (Strasbourg, October 23, 1540), in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 4:208, and again (Strasbourg, February 19, 1541), 4:225.

¹²Calvin, “To Farel” (Strasbourg, August 1541), in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 4:280.

¹³*Ibid.*, 281.

embroiled in public controversies. “I must confess that by nature I have not much courage and that I am timid, faint-hearted and weak.”¹⁴ Nothing could have proved more of a challenge to those natural tendencies and aspirations than ministry in Geneva: a backwater city of perpetual conflict, with passionate factions—political as well as religious. From his flight from France to constant public controversies that taxed his patience, each calling seemed to be imposed on him. Yet if God had called him to the post through the voice of the church, he could—indeed must—accept it. Bucer’s Jonah analogy may have been apt after all.

Second, it points up the complexity of Calvin’s ministry in Geneva. While those who are sympathetic to his convictions can only celebrate his uncompromising dedication to God’s Word, those who are not can only regard him as an inflexible despot. The truth is more complicated than either of these views.

One of the reasons for Calvin’s surreptitious ejection by the city council along with Farel and two other pastors was a riot that broke out when they refused to celebrate the Supper with unleavened wafers after a synod of Swiss Reformed churches upheld Bern’s requirement of the practice. For his own part, Calvin did not even know about his senior colleagues’ decision until it was done, and in retrospect he thought it was a petty issue. Yet it was more a test case for a larger contest: namely, whether the political authority had the last word in the church’s affairs and whether, in particular, Bern’s church and city council could determine every aspect of the Genevan church’s life.

On some occasions, Calvin displayed youthful brashness, confusing stubbornness with fidelity and impatience with courage. Nevertheless, as he matured in these conflicts, Calvin became a remarkably flexible and ecumenical leader, willing to compromise even on points that he considered quite important, if it held out hopes of greater unity in the church. At a time of bitter inter-confessional polemics, he grew rather quickly in his ability to promote common ground and consensus while refusing to yield to the slightest confusion on what he considered the weightiest matters. In moments when others were given to vehemence, he could be the sweet voice of reason and compromise. Calvin was a complicated man in a complicated situation.

¹⁴ Calvin, preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms*, quoted by Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 27–28.

Third, in spite of the complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes he sometimes exhibited, the episode highlights the conviction that was his consistent, unyielding, and unvarying North Star: *the absolute priority of God's glory and therefore of God's Word*. So upon his return to the pulpit, he simply picked up at the verse where he left off. Like Luther's defense at the Diet of Worms, Calvin's whole ministry can be considered one long "here I stand" speech before emperors and popes abroad and magistrates and ministers at home. Even many who quarreled with his interpretations had to conclude that his conscience indeed was captive to the Word of God.

Calvin as Pastor

Calvin was a pastor. We may remember him for other things, but as he grew into this office for which at first he felt unsuited, "minister of Word and sacrament" became the core of his identity.

On the one hand, the Reformer was remarkably patient and comforting to the "bruised reed" and "flickering candle." Indeed, he saw himself in these terms and spoke more openly of his faults than of his virtues. He refers frequently in his writings to moments when he misunderstood Scripture on a certain point and was corrected or learned wisdom from one of his parishioners.¹⁵

Precisely because they took God's Word seriously, struggling pilgrims found their own faith and repentance weak and halting. Christ is the friend of sinners, Calvin constantly taught, and the minister's main calling is to assure tender consciences that God is favorable toward them in Jesus Christ. He never ridiculed or demeaned. "With regard to manners," Beza recalled,

although nature had formed him for gravity, yet, in the common intercourse of life, there was no man who was more pleasant. In bearing with infirmities he was remarkably prudent; never either putting weak brethren to the blush or terrifying them by unseasonable rebukes, yet never flattering their faults.¹⁶

So Calvin never had trouble with those who, like himself, *fell short* of God's Word—in doctrine or in life.

¹⁵ Calvin gives us an interesting example in his commentary on Ps. 115:16. I discovered this reference in *ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Beza, "Life of Calvin," xcvi.

On the other hand, Calvin showed little patience toward those—especially leaders in the church—who displayed either explicitly or implicitly that they did not take God’s Word *seriously*. The obvious examples for him were the priests and monks. However, Calvin was even more irritated when, whether out of laziness, ignorance, or pride, those who had embraced the clear evangelical message failed to fulfill their office. Failure to take Scripture seriously was also evidenced by laypeople who mocked Christ and his ordinances despite having the benefit of faithful ministers.

Especially in these instances where God’s Word was ignored or trivialized, Calvin did display that censorious temperament that Beza found even in the reports of his friends of youth. He was harder on himself in that regard than he was on others, but he was also hard on others. As Calvin was suffering various illnesses in his last few days, Beza says that whenever he and others would beg Calvin to rest from dictating and writing, Calvin would reply, “What, would you have the Lord to find me idle?” When Calvin was assured that God’s Word required a certain position or action to be taken, the only appropriate response was obedience: sooner rather than later. For example, he rebuked privately Bucer and Lutheran theologian Philipp Melanchthon for conceding too much to Rome on justification at an imperial conference. The great Reformed theologian in Bern, Wolfgang Musculus, called Calvin “an always-drawn bow.”¹⁷

Yet he was an ecumenical activist in a situation that seemed to favor the most factious spirits. Even in the wake of the anathemas of Trent, Calvin agreed to participate in the Colloquy of Poissy with Roman Catholic leaders. Though Calvin was prevented from making the trip by health (and the city leaders’ concern for his safety), Beza attended as the Genevan representative. Calvin worked tirelessly at healing the Lutheran-Reformed breach. Melanchthon dubbed him “The Theologian.”¹⁸

Calvin called Luther “my ever-honored father,” and via Bucer the German Reformer sent greetings to Calvin, whose books he read “with special delight.”¹⁹ Luther and Pomeranus asked Melanchthon to pass on their commendation: “Calvin has acquired great favor in their eyes.”²⁰ In fact, it is reported that after reading his treatise on the Supper, Luther told a friend that “I might well have entrusted this controversy to him from the beginning. If

¹⁷ Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 94.

¹⁸ Beza, “Life of Calvin,” xxxvi.

¹⁹ Quoted in Parker, *John Calvin*, 162.

²⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*

my opponents had done the same, we should soon have been reconciled.”²¹ T. H. L. Parker relates, “When some mischief makers showed Luther a passage where Calvin criticized him all he said was: ‘I hope that Calvin will one day think better of us; but in any event it is good that he should even now have some proof of our good will toward him.’” In response, Calvin said, “If we are not affected by such moderation, we are surely of stone,” and in his Romans commentary he apologized for his immoderate critique.²²

In 1557 he proposed to Melanchthon “a free and universal council to put an end to the divisions of Christendom.” When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer proposed a general synod to unite all evangelical churches, Calvin replied that for his part he “would not grudge to cross ten seas if it were necessary” for the project.²³ In spite of misgivings, and a rocky relationship with Heinrich Bullinger, Calvin initiated a joint statement on the Supper that, while not wholly satisfactory to the Reformer, moved Zurich away from Zwinglian memorialism.

By temperament and conviction, Calvin was a conservative Reformer. “Rashness” he frequently identified as a besetting sin of many whose zeal exceeded their pastoral instincts. He had learned quickly that even in primary matters, the church could be reformed only by consistent and patient instruction. There could be no “top-down” approach; the people, especially the leaders, had to be brought along to embrace the conclusions by persuasion from Scripture.

Unmovable as he was where key principles were at stake, Calvin was as sharp in his rebukes toward those who exceeded the bounds of “due moderation,” especially when they provoked controversies over secondary matters. He rebuked John Knox and other exiles in the Frankfurt church for provoking controversy with the Lutherans over ceremonies. He warned French exiles in London not to demand everything to be patterned on his model, making “an idol of me” and “a New Jerusalem of Geneva.”²⁴

Through the many controversies he endured, Calvin matured as a person and as a pastor, frequently holding his tongue when assailed. More than most of his contemporaries in the battle, he picked his fights with growing discernment and continued to name as friends those who showed themselves to be suspicious and even sometimes open adversaries.

²¹ Quoted in *ibid.*

²² Calvin, quoted in *ibid.*, 163.

²³ Calvin, quoted in *ibid.*, 165.

²⁴ Calvin, quoted in Irena Backus and Philip Benedict, introduction to *Calvin and His Influence, 1509–2009*, ed. Irena Backus and Philip Benedict (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

While there is abundant evidence of Calvin's impatience with and disregard for human flattery, there is just as much to demonstrate that he was generally open-minded and willing to listen to criticism. When a pastor in the Church of Neuchâtel criticized one of Calvin's books on a few points, the Reformer replied, "So far from being offended because of your opinions, I am greatly delighted with this straightforward plainness. Nor does my perversity reach to such a degree as to allow myself a freedom of opinion which I would wish to take away from others."²⁵

Overcoming Caricatures

If caricatures are the price of historical fame, then Calvin may be one of the most famous leaders in history. For few figures have unfounded rumors by enemies been allowed to stand more persistently as historical fact. The "tyrant of Geneva," a "Protestant Pope," Calvin is reviled as a kill-joy whose pastime was ruminating with relish on the fate of the damned and ensuring that the present life of his subjects was as close to that fate as possible. Ignoring the conclusions of specialists, Philip Jenkins repeats the slur in a recent book.²⁶ Not surprisingly, there is not a substantiating footnote.

If later legends of a repressed Geneva evolved after Calvin's death, his contemporary enemies created quite different caricatures. According to Roman Catholic polemicists, Geneva was a cauldron of debauchery and a refuge for hedonists of every kind.²⁷ It is true that there were taverns as well as plays, which Calvin attended without scruple. He even rebuked a fellow minister for criticizing a play from the pulpit, criticism that, Calvin thought, showed contempt for the actors. "Our play narrowly escaped being converted into a tragedy," he told Farel.²⁸ Thomas Norton, who made the

²⁵ Calvin, "To Christopher Libertet" (Basle, September 4, 1534), in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 4:43.

²⁶ See, for example, Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 260. Jenkins expresses astonishment at novelist Salman Rushdie's hope for a Muslim equivalent of the Protestant Reformation, since Calvin was "a revolutionary who established a repressive theocratic regime in Geneva, with moral and religious orthodoxies enforced by the full force of state power."

²⁷ Francis Higman, "The Origins of the Image of Geneva," in John B. Roney and Martin I. Klauber, *The Identity of Geneva: The Christian Commonwealth, 1564–1864* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998). See also Gillian Lewis, "Calvinism in Geneva in the Time of Calvin and of Beza," in *International Calvinism, 1541–1715*, ed. Menna Prestwich (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). After crossing swords with the Reformer repeatedly, Jerome Bolsec became the first Calvin muckraker. Sexually profligate (with men and women), Calvin was simultaneously a libertine and a despot, according to Bolsec's 1577 biography. Critical scholarship has exposed these misunderstandings, and yet rumors die hard.

²⁸ Calvin, "To Farel" (Geneva, July 4, 1546), in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 5:61. The senate asked Calvin his opinion, but he said he would only add his voice to the ministers as with one voice. One of the ministers (named Michael) inveighed in a sermon against the actors, and many people came to Calvin with

first English translation of the *Institutes*, coauthored with Thomas Sackville *Gorboduc*, the first English tragedy ever staged. Calvin's associate, Theodore Beza, wrote the first stage drama in the French language.²⁹ As Spitz summarizes, "Calvin himself had an unusually good wine cellar. God does not forbid us to laugh, he said, and was himself very adept at punning."³⁰

However, not a single charge was brought against Calvin for personal misconduct in a disorderly city that, under his ministry, became widely noted for its justice, civility, and (eventually) kindness to strangers. Calvin was especially devoted to the cause of the poor exiles who flooded the city and were often mistreated by the proud Genevans. Ignoring the pleas of the magistrates, Calvin tended to the spiritual needs of plague victims in the hospital. Marilynne Robinson reminds us that Calvin's entire life was burdened with a deep sense of obligation to the suffering and that from its very first edition the *Institutes* was written to defend victims of persecution.³¹

The survival of such contradictory legends—Calvin the moralistic dictator and Calvin the debauched godfather of vice—is perhaps an indicator of the historical significance of Geneva, and Calvin in particular, for friend and foe alike.

Even the popular legends of Calvin burning witches and ruling Geneva with an iron fist have become laughable as historians investigate the primary records. A brief summary will suffice to make this point.

Before the city embraced the Reformation, the bishop was also the head of state, on behalf of the Duke of Savoy, with whom he had constant quarrels over power. The duke's tyranny galvanized the city fathers to seek political independence just as they also embraced the Reformation.

If anyone came close to a dictator in Geneva during Calvin's lifetime, it was his implacable foe Ami Perrin, a tempestuous buffoon whom Calvin dubbed privately "our comic Caesar." Calvin, however, refused to use his office for any political agenda. On the contrary, as Scott M. Manetsch notes, the city council even "prosecuted heretics and serious moral offenders,"

strong complaints. It nearly led to a riot. "I endeavoured in the second discourse to appease their exasperation, observing moderation, for I judged that he had acted imprudently in having at an unseasonable time chosen such a theme for declamation. But his extravagance was the more displeasing, since I could by no means approve of what he had said." "They threateningly assert that they would have killed Michael were it not that they revered me. . . . Viret is present as a spectator, who has again returned, according to arrangement, with a view to restore our furious friend to sanity" (5:62).

²⁹ Marilynne Robinson, preface to *John Calvin, Steward of God's Covenant: Selected Writings*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage, 2006), xxiv.

³⁰ Lewis Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation: 1517–1559* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 159.

³¹ Robinson, introduction to *John Calvin*, xiii–xiv.

appointed church officers, and dictated the schedule for the church calendar. "For their part, Geneva's ministers were employees of the state who could be dismissed at any time . . . and who were not permitted to sit on any of the citizen councils."³²

Geneva rewarded Calvin with citizenship only late in his ministry. Far from assuming political powers, even at the height of the respect he enjoyed he was never able to push through city hall all of his desired reforms of the church. If the pope considered himself the ultimate ruler of Christendom, the Lutheran and Reformed churches regarded the prince (or city council) as their "nursing father." Along with Farel and Viret, Calvin sought greater independence of the church from the state. Even after his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* was approved, the senators wanted to retain the right to excommunicate. To Calvin, this violated the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal jurisdictions, especially since it involved civil punishments that Calvin thought entirely out of place in the church's discipline.

It is true that in the 1540s the senators asked Calvin to draft the republic's constitution. This was not because he was a Protestant ayatollah, since he was at the same time still being rebuffed in attempts to secure the liberty of the church's consistory over its own affairs. Rather, the appeal reflected the simple fact that no one else came close to his command of Greco-Roman civil history and law. After all, his first work, a commentary on Seneca's *On Clemency*, was a textbook used in the law schools of French universities. Yet if ever there might be a moment when the Reformer might set his allegedly theocratic system in stone, this was it. What was the result? "Calvin seems only to have pruned the law," according to historian William Monter, "to make punishment less severe, while attempting to ensure that all men were equal before the law and that the laws were actually enforced." Equity and clemency were urged over against tyrannical rigor. His friend Germain Colladon updated Calvin's draft in 1568 and "it remained the foundation of Genevan public law until the end of the republic."³³ It is hardly the work of an aspiring despot. Rather, it is typically regarded as a document in early constitutional republicanism.

When Ami Perrin plotted to abolish the consistory (church leadership) and take absolute control of the state (with some French collusion), the senate tried him for sedition. New elections were held, and now Farel, Calvin,

³² Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 27.

³³ William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), 152.

and the other ministers received support to pursue their reforms. So, surely from this moment forward we would see the despotic Reformer emerge to reign with a free hand. Instead, the senators determined that such power would never be entrusted to a single person again.³⁴

Far from pastors monitoring every aspect of behavior, with spies and secret police, the church registers “provide the impression that the pastors were really absorbed in their supervision of the missionary campaign,” notes Robert M. Kingdon.³⁵ Recently, Scott Manetsch’s comprehensive study of the church records demonstrates a concern primarily “with educating the ignorant, defending the weak, and mediating interpersonal conflicts.”³⁶ Women and children were often little more than property in medieval Europe, and the records display the patience and seriousness with which pastors and elders pursued resolution of conflict. In fact, a merchant confronted for beating his wife with a stool “complained that ‘the Consistory is the paradise of women’ and that city magistrates ‘pursue men and protect women.’”³⁷ “It petitioned the Small Council to provide gainful employment for young women” and “defended the cause of helpless orphans, poor laborers, mistreated prisoners, despised refugees, and social misfits.”³⁸ Although the myth is still perpetuated, there was not a single case of execution for blasphemy in Geneva during Calvin’s ministry, even though blasphemy was a capital offense in medieval law.³⁹

Calvin and the other pastors repeatedly affirmed that the consistory could not administer legal or temporal punishments, but could correct only with “the spiritual sword of God’s Word,” and that “corrections are nothing but medicine to bring sinners back to our Lord.” The *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* and the records of actual cases demonstrate the remarkable extent to which this stated intention was followed.⁴⁰ Indeed, whereas Rome claimed authority to anathematize, Calvin argued that the consistory exercises the keys of Christ with warnings to the erring member and “calls him back to salvation.”⁴¹ Calvin warned against discipline degenerating

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁵ Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555–1563* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 2007), 31.

³⁶ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 183–84.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁹ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 153.

⁴⁰ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 184. “During the 1540s Calvin’s Consistory suspended a relatively small number of Genevans from the sacrament of the Table—on average of one or two dozen per year” (185). This is remarkably small considering that the whole population belonged to the church.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

into “spiritual butchery.”⁴² This undue rigor was something he detected in both Roman Catholic and Anabaptist discipline.

Many of the matters that came before the consistory had to do with making sure that parishioners knew the Christian faith well enough to receive Communion. For example, they could not receive Communion if they secretly embraced Roman Catholic or Anabaptist beliefs and practices, but the form of discipline was instruction. Others were admonished for drunken outbursts (even urinating) during services.⁴³ As one might expect, the magistrates frowned on practices like dancing naked at weddings, but the civil laws of Geneva were identical to those in Europe, even Italy.⁴⁴

Alarmed at the condition of marriage in his day, Scott H. Hendrix notes, Luther urged princes and magistrates to tighten laws: “In 1539 he wrote that people who wished to be Christian would keep houses of prostitution out of their towns while those who tolerated such houses were no better than pagans.”⁴⁵ Lutheran church orders barred from Communion “open adulterers, whores, rowdies, regular drunkards, blasphemers, and others who lead a shameful life.” If they still resist, after being “earnestly admonished by one or two preachers to change their life,” “they are to be regarded as unchristian and people who are damned, just as Christ teaches us by the judgment he renders in Matthew 18:15–20.” “They are not to be admitted to the sacrament, to their greater condemnation, until they publicly change their life, because they have publicly sinned. They can attend the sermon, however.”⁴⁶

The same policy was followed in Geneva—suspension from the Table, but not from the ministry of the Word—in the hope that offenders would be led to repentance. In fact, Manetsch reports that “only around 13 percent of all suspensions in Geneva were for sexual sins such as fornication, adultery, and solicitation” during both Calvin’s and Beza’s lifetimes.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, in Roman Catholic and Anabaptist discipline, excommunication meant typically being barred not only from the church entirely but from the social community as well.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 193. A particularly egregious abuse of discipline did occur when a young husband and school-teacher was suspended briefly from Communion for lying about his sexual impotence. Yet what is interesting is that this happened a year after Calvin’s death, and his parents “complained bitterly that ‘if Monsieur Calvin had still been alive, [the consistory] would not have behaved in this fashion.’”

⁴⁴ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 216.

⁴⁵ Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard*, 62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 112, quoting the Hamburg church order adopted in 1529.

⁴⁷ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 202.

By design, excommunication was to be rare, “only around 3–4 percent of all interdictions” between 1542 and 1609.⁴⁸ Furthermore, these matters had to remain private; gossip, too, could provoke a letter from the consistory. The way it actually worked out, Elsie Anne McKee observes, only non-repentance could lead to excommunication. In fact, “a repentant murderer might be received, an unrepentant quarreler would not.”⁴⁹

It should be noted that no minister or elder—even Calvin—could exercise discipline individually. Rather, all actions were those of the consistory—ministers and elders—as one body, in common consent. Monter reminds us, “Calvin was a pastor—as well as the permanent Moderator of the Genevan Company of Pastors—and he had no other kind of authority in Geneva.”⁵⁰ Manetsch relates that on one occasion the Company, acting on evidence, removed a minister who had groped his female servant. Vehement in his response, the minister accused the Company of injustice—and especially Calvin of abusing his authority in the matter as moderator of the Company. At an emergency session, “Calvin requested that the Company judge whether he had exceeded his authority as moderator and minister” in the process. “The ministers dismissed Calvin and Ferron from the meeting and discussed the case in private before finally exonerating Calvin and upholding the charges against Ferron.” The offending minister was suspended from the ministry by the city council, and he left Geneva.⁵¹ It is hardly a despot who asks his fellow pastors to judge whether he had exceeded his authority. Furthermore, there was no partiality: ministers also were removed from office for various indiscretions.⁵²

Calvin even insisted that pastors rotate throughout the parish churches so that the people would be attached to the ministry rather than the minister. In fact, Monter says, “it is worth noting, as special evidence of Calvin’s lifelong struggle against what the twentieth century calls the cult of personality, that neither he nor his successor was dispensed from routine pastoral work in order to fulfill these pan-European responsibilities.”⁵³ “Despite the common picture of a Genevan theocracy,” Stanford historian (and Lutheran) Lewis Spitz concludes, “Calvin was deeply concerned to

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁹ Elsie Anne McKee, “Context, Contours, Contents: Towards a Description of Calvin’s Understanding of Worship,” in *Calvin Studies Society Papers, 1995, 1997: Calvin and Spirituality; Calvin and His Contemporaries*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services, 1998), 84n48.

⁵⁰ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 107.

⁵¹ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 63.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵³ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 142.

separate the church with its spiritual functions from state control.”⁵⁴ This was true even in the tragic affair that hangs like a dark cloud over Calvin’s memory: the burning of Michael Servetus.

The Case of Michael Servetus

Calvin knew of Servetus from the past, before fleeing Paris. In fact, he had risked his life by agreeing to meet with the outspoken Anabaptist and anti-Trinitarian in private, but Servetus never showed. Fleeing imprisonment in France, where he was awaiting execution at the hands of the Inquisition, Servetus arrived in Geneva imagining that he could with impunity interrupt Calvin’s sermon by attacking the Trinity—“that triad of impossible monstrosities”—and was quickly arrested.⁵⁵

Declaring himself “First Syndic” (sole ruler), it was the redoubtable Ami Perrin who, after a trial, condemned Servetus to the flames on October 27, 1553. “Perhaps the most eloquent commentary on Genevan justice came from its most famous victim, Michael Servetus, who at one point in his trial was asked whether he preferred to be tried in Geneva or be sent back to France. Servetus fell on his knees and implored *Messieurs* to be tried in Geneva.”⁵⁶

Perrin and the city council sought advice from various Protestant cities, and all returned the same judgment: an anti-Trinitarian with an international reputation like Servetus’s must be burned at the stake, according to the common law of Christendom. The Inquisition sentenced the escaped prisoner to death *in absentia*—“in a slow fire.”⁵⁷ Would Protestants even tolerate those who strike at the heart of the catholic faith, thus justifying the immediate dispatch of every army in Christendom against the republic?

Calvin pleaded repeatedly with Servetus to recant, but to no effect. The “slow burning” demanded by the Inquisition was ignored, but the magistrates insisted on burning. Monter explains, “Calvin tried to have the sentence lightened to simply execution, but without success.”⁵⁸ Even “gentle Melanchthon” wrote to Calvin, “To you also the Church owes gratitude at the present moment, and will owe it to the latest posterity. . . . I affirm

⁵⁴ Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation*, 159.

⁵⁵ Parker, *John Calvin*, 139.

⁵⁶ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 155.

⁵⁷ Parker, *John Calvin*, 145.

⁵⁸ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 84.

also that your magistrates did right in punishing, after a regular trial, this blasphemous man.”⁵⁹

Concerning Servetus, Monter reminds us, “His was the only case, but at the same time an extremely significant case, of a man put to death for his religious opinions in Calvin’s Geneva. Other victims followed him in nearby Protestant states.”⁶⁰ Indeed, fully Trinitarian evangelicals were being sent to the flames, gallows, and sword every day across Europe, especially in Calvin’s homeland. In these cases, the Reformer vehemently protested any attempt to take up the sword in defending the gospel or, in its defense, their own lives.

However, Calvin compounded his complicity in the affair by writing a defense of capital punishment for notorious anti-Trinitarians like Servetus. Apparently Calvin—like the other Reformers—saw no contradiction between Servetus’s execution and his own teaching on the spiritual reign of Christ by his Word alone. It is unworthy of the truth that he proclaimed to exonerate Calvin in this affair simply as a man of his time, especially when others were appealing to the Reformer’s own writings to defend religious toleration. At the same time, even in this tragic episode he played not the role of a despot, but the role that was assigned to him—and which he willingly accepted—as a pastor in Christendom.

“He was not trying to Calvinize France or to make Genevan Calvinism international,” observes Hendrix. Like Luther’s, his missionary concern was to recultivate Christ’s vineyard in so-called Christendom and to extend the gospel beyond Europe.⁶¹ And yet, under his ministry, Geneva did provide an international model. Refugees—many of them students—poured in not only from all of Europe but also from Russia, Crete, Malta, and Tunisia. And the first Protestant missionaries were sent from Geneva to the New World: Brazil. As Philip Benedict points out, Geneva’s population more than doubled during Calvin’s ministry. Despots repress their populations, but the complaint of Genevans was that their new republic was being overrun by foreign refugees.⁶² Given his own experience, it is not surprising that Calvin’s favored metaphors for the Christian life are exile, pilgrimage, feast, refugee, and finding asylum only in Christ.

As we explore Calvin’s view of the Christian life, we discover a teacher

⁵⁹ Philip Schaff, “Protestant Intolerance,” in *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, accessed November 10, 2011, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc8.iv.xvi.iv.html>.

⁶⁰ Monter, *Calvin’s Geneva*, 84.

⁶¹ Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard*, 94.

⁶² Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, 108.

who arrived at his convictions not out of ivory-tower speculation or monastic contemplation, but out of constant crises, tests, disappointing setbacks, and personal suffering. Perhaps this introduction finds its most eloquent conclusion in the words of a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist: "His life might be seen as a great tragedy were it not for the strength of his work, which has had an incalculable impact on the thought and culture of the West and the whole Christian world."⁶³

⁶³ Robinson, preface to *John Calvin*, xv.

CHAPTER 2

CALVIN ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: IN CONTEXT

Some misunderstandings of Calvin's theology and piety are due to friends, not just foes. The first step in disentangling Calvin from the many uses that we have made of him, then, is to examine Calvin's piety in his own context.¹

The Catholic Calvin

First, there is the "Catholic Calvin." Here "Catholic" encompasses the consensus of all Christians everywhere. It is broader than the term *Roman Catholic*. Although we know what people mean when they say, "I was raised Catholic, but I'm a Christian now," Calvin would have been baffled by this way of putting it. He always considered himself more Catholic than his Roman critics. Indeed, he was hardly the first to have thought so, since the Christian East has long pointed out the oxymoron in "Roman Catholic." After all, "Catholic" means universal, and "Roman" refers to a part rather than the whole. The bishop of Rome was originally one among other key leaders. Even the sixth-century Roman bishop Gregory the Great said that "universal pontiff" was "a form of proud address" and that any bishop who

¹See David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), for a rich summary of Calvin's views on various subjects with a keen eye toward situating him in his own world rather than ours.

assumed that title was “a precursor to Antichrist.”² The current pope was schismatic, in Calvin’s view, and the Reformers were simply calling the church back to its sources.

Although Calvin’s father, Gerard, had destined him for the priesthood, it was a course that young Jean enthusiastically embraced. At the age of twelve he was the local bishop’s secretary and even received the monk’s tonsure (distinctive haircut). His gifts and zeal won the patronage of the distinguished Montmor family, allowing him to attend the most prestigious colleges of the University of Paris (Sorbonne). At the Collège de la Marche he acquired his celebrated command of Latin under the distinguished teacher Mathurin Cordier, who would eventually come to evangelical convictions and to teach at Geneva’s Academy. Calvin then studied theology and philosophy at the Collège de Montaigu, after Erasmus and just before Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. Here the “new learning” (classical humanism) was breathing new energy into the conservative university. Although his memories of the strict regimen were as unpleasant as Erasmus’s, Calvin became a student of classical Greek and Roman literature while at the college and also began his Hebrew and Greek study of Scripture.

When his close friend Nicolas Cop, son of the king’s surgeon, became the president of the University of Paris, Calvin helped to draft the inaugural speech. Peppered with calls for evangelical reform, the address provoked the ire of university and royal authorities, and the pair narrowly escaped. Their libraries were burned, they fled to Basel together, and Nicolas’s brother Michel—a noted Hebraist—made Calvin proficient in Hebrew.

Alongside his close study of Scripture in the original languages, Calvin devoured the writings of the ancient church fathers, especially Irenaeus, Chrysostom, and the Cappadocians in the East and Ambrose, Hilary, and Augustine in the West. He even called upon the testimony of “the better theologians” of the medieval church, such as Thomas Aquinas, Bernard, and Bonaventure. They left an indelible stamp on his exegesis and theological formulations, as well as his liturgical and devotional writings. In fact, he frequently swayed audiences in favor of the Reformation with his arguments from these sources, cited nearly verbatim from memory.

Writing to the French King Henri II, whose policy of persecution was even more violent than his father’s, Calvin said, “We have here laid down with simplicity a brief confession of the faith we hold, which we trust you

² *Letters of Pope Gregory the Great*, book 5, epistle 18.

will find in accordance with that of the Catholic church.”³ Richard Muller reminds us that although the Reformation provoked controversy over justification, the sacraments, and the church, “the doctrines of God, the Trinity, creation, providence, predestination, and the last things were taken over by the magisterial Reformation virtually without alteration.”⁴ Later Reformed pastors and theologians would identify themselves not as Calvinists but as “Reformed Catholics.”⁵

Radical Protestants—particularly the Anabaptists—did not appeal to antiquity. As contemporary Anabaptist scholar Leonard Verduin notes, “They were not interested in any continuity with the Church of the past; for them that Church was a ‘fallen’ creature.”⁶ Calvin, on the other hand, was eager to maintain every possible connection with the ancient church and the best heritage of Christian faith and practice down to his own day. Far from anticipating the Enlightenment ideals of progress and individual autonomy, Calvin upbraided the pope for having an itch for novelty—creating doctrines and forms of worship without scriptural warrant and the example of the ancient church. Luther and Calvin were Catholic Reformers, not radical modernizers.

The Evangelical Calvin

An earthy, gregarious, and sometimes boisterous son of German peasant stock, Luther peppered his sermons and conversations with homely—sometimes even crude—illustrations that resonated with the average Wittenberger. In his translation of the Bible, he searched diligently for the most familiar word or phrase in everyday German that would communicate the original text. With a larger-than-life personality, which he felt quite at home in divulging, Luther seems especially suited to the role that providence gave him. It is perhaps not surprising that Luther’s informal table-talk conversations were recorded for posterity.

Hailing from an upper-middle-class French home and taken under the wing of a distinguished family for a privileged education, Calvin was more refined. Temperamentally, he was reserved and private—even shy,

³ Calvin, “To the King of France” (Geneva, October 1557), in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 6:373.

⁴ Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 39.

⁵ Richard Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 54.

⁶ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 156.

avoiding autobiography. Contemporaries report the congeniality of a man whose home was often filled with guests. In Strasbourg, he and his wife, Idelette, were at the center of activity in a bustling youth hostel that they founded. However, he was the type of person who would have been uneasy with note takers hovering about over dinner recording the conversation. In short, though serious about the matters at hand, Luther seems at home on the stage of history, while Calvin seems genuinely to have preferred a peaceful obscurity.

Also, many changes had occurred in the two decades that separated the Reformers in age (they never met personally). Luther, the Augustinian monk, was fond of the German mystics and became the pioneering Reformer; Calvin was shaped in student days by the French humanists and early Reformers, who displayed little interest in mysticism. Their contexts were different, too. The Lutheran Reformation was an event in the history of the Holy Roman Empire (basically Germany), with Luther as the central figure who had come under the protection of now evangelical princes. However, Reformed churches emerged primarily in independent cities, whose magistrates embraced the Reformation usually after a public Roman Catholic–Reformed debate. Although Bucer came close, there was no one comparable religious authority to Luther or political equivalent of the united princes. Consequently, consensus was reached more by mutual consent of the cities and their church leaders. Calvin was but a rising star in a constellation of already established leaders. Furthermore, while Luther was at home in Wittenberg, with a free hand even sometimes to meddle in political affairs, Calvin was a foreigner and exile in a city whose leaders often stifled his attempts simply to reform the church.

There were similarities as well. Luther was destined by his father for law and then the priesthood; the reverse in Calvin's case. Both knew first-hand the most rigorous expressions of late-medieval theology and practice. In fact, far from youthful rebels, both confessed the depth to which they had devoted themselves to Rome. They were censorious of themselves and others who failed to invest themselves fully and sincerely in the form of medieval piety in which they had been reared.

After embracing the gospel Calvin also shared Luther's concern to pursue reform cautiously. "For it is not possible that the public government of the church can be all at once changed," he told the king of Poland (Sigismund Augustus), a Reformed monarch known as a pioneer of religious

liberty.⁷ Although he was more concerned than Luther to purge remnants of false worship, he counseled toleration and patient instruction where there were differences of opinion. Like Luther, he never abandoned the church, but sought to reform it by going back to its own source in Scripture. And, like Luther, he was excommunicated by the papacy, he was hunted by the Inquisition, and his writings were placed on the index of forbidden books.

Calvin also shared with Reformers like Luther and Bucer a deep conviction that sound doctrine is the soul of piety, not an intellectual game. He described the dogma of implicit faith (assenting to whatever the church teaches) as ignorance disguised as humility. Surely faith requires knowledge. Nevertheless, faith is supremely trust in a person—namely, Christ as he is clothed in his gospel. This Word of God captures our whole person, not just our mind or will or affections. In fact, “true faith consists more in living experience than in high-flown speculations that flit about in the brain.”⁸ “I have censured the curiosity of those who would agitate questions which are truly nothing else than mere tortures to the intellect,” he said.⁹ Theology is not abstract theory, but the most practical knowledge of all.

In fact, knowledge and experience are inseparable. Calvin repeatedly raises the objection that Roman critics of justification have not really experienced a crisis of conscience before a holy God. They are not only ignorant of Scripture but also experientially naïve. “It is not strange, however, that addle-pated monks who, having never experienced any struggle of conscience . . . should thus prate the perfection of the Law,” despite their hypocrisy. “With the same confidence do they talk of a heaven for hire, while they themselves meanwhile continue engrossed with the present hire, after which they are always gaping.” They fail to realize, he says, “that there is no work untainted with impurity, until it be washed away by the blood of Christ.”¹⁰ He adds, “Were regeneration perfected in this life the observance of the law would be possible. . . . But there is no wonder that they speak so boldly of things they know not. War is pleasant to those who have never tried it.”¹¹

Calvin had tried it. Like Luther, he was more devoted to medieval piety

⁷ Calvin, “To the King of Poland” (Geneva, December 5, 1554), in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 6:108.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.5.9.

⁹ Calvin, “Psychopannychia,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 3:418.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

than most of his peers. He wanted to get it right. He wanted to *be* right before God. If such faithful young men of the church became leaders of the Reformation, it was because they had taken Rome's piety further and deeper than most, and it left them destitute. In response to the Council of Trent's canon condemning those who teach that we should not expect our good works to be rewarded with eternal life, Calvin writes, "Such boldness is not strange in men who have never felt any serious fear of Divine judgment."¹²

The same concern is expressed even more directly in his passionate letter to Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto:

Hence, I observe, Sadoletto, that you have too indolent [lazy] a theology, as is almost always the case with those who have never had experience in serious struggles of conscience. For, otherwise, you would never place a Christian man on ground so slippery, nay, so precipitous, that he can scarcely stand a moment if even the slightest push is given him.¹³

Calvin imagines that he is standing with Sadoletto before Christ on judgment day: "I, O Lord, as I had been educated from a boy, always professed the Christian faith," but did not really know what it was.

I believed, as I had been taught, that I was redeemed by the death of thy Son from liability to eternal death, but the redemption I thought was one whose virtue could never reach me. I anticipated a future resurrection, but hated to think of it, as being an event most dreadful. . . . They, indeed, preached of thy clemency toward men, but confined it to those who should show themselves deserving of it.¹⁴

In spite of "some intervals of quiet, I was still far off from true peace of conscience; for, whenever I descended into myself, or raised my mind to thee, extreme terror seized me—terror which no expiations nor satisfactions could cure" and which could only be ignored. Then I heard "a very different doctrine," which actually

brought me back to its fountainhead. . . . Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately

¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹³ Calvin, "Reply by John Calvin to Cardinal Sadoletto's Letter," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 1:52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

resisted; for . . . it was the greatest difficulty I was induced to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error. One thing in particular made me averse to those new teachers; namely, reverence for the Church.¹⁵

Yet, Calvin says, once he opened his ears, he understood the truth from those who treasured it. “They spoke nobly of the Church and showed the greatest desire to cultivate it.”¹⁶

The Certainty of the Gospel

Calvin felt the sting of the Devil’s taunt to Luther, “Are you alone wise among men?” We are certain of the gospel because it is so clearly revealed in Scripture—in contrast with the teachers of Rome.

I do not dream, however, of a clarity of faith which never errs in discriminating between truth and falsehood, is never deceived, nor do I figure to myself an arrogance which looks down as from a height on the whole human race, waits for no man’s judgment, and makes no distinction between learned and unlearned.

Indeed, it is better to suspend judgment than to rashly criticize and raise dissent. “I only contend that . . . the truth of the word of God is so clear and certain that it cannot be overthrown by either men or angels.”¹⁷

The Reformed have no controversy at all with the true Catholic church, Calvin contends.¹⁸ “You know, Sadoleto,” he daringly presses, “that our agreement with antiquity is far closer than yours” and that we are only trying to “renew that ancient form of the church” that has been “distorted by illiterate men” and “was afterwards flagitiously mangled and almost destroyed by the Roman Pontiff and his faction.”¹⁹ Every aspect of the church’s ministry—its doctrine, the sacraments, ceremonies, and discipline—had been profaned by Rome. “Will you obtrude upon me, for the Church, a body which furiously persecutes everything sanctioned by our

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

religion, both as delivered by the oracles of God and embodied in the writings of the Holy Fathers, and approved by ancient Councils?"²⁰

Even Calvin's humanist sympathies were tested by the evangelical emphasis. In many ways, the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) was a founding father of both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. However, behind Erasmus stands the broader influence of the Brethren of the Common Life, also known as the *devotio moderna* (modern devotion). This is especially worth mentioning because I think contemporary evangelical spirituality bears more in common with this movement than with the Reformation.

Founded in the fourteenth century by Gerard Groote, the Brethren represent a mystical-pietist reform effort. Among their distinguished alumni were cardinals and a pope, as well as Erasmus, Luther, Bullinger, Anabaptist leaders like Balthasar Hubmaier and Hans Denck, and the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola. Everything turned on "the imitation of Christ," which was the title of the devotional best seller written by Brethren member Thomas à Kempis. However, what set the Reformers apart was that they challenged the *doctrine* of the medieval church. For the most part, the Brethren were not interested in church doctrine and ritual, and they were generally inclined toward more optimistic views of free will and justification as inner transformation.

As he approached the fork in the road, Calvin declared, "I am a pupil of Luther's." Addressing Emperor Charles V, he said, "God roused Luther and the others, who carried the torch ahead, in order to recover the way of salvation; and by whose service our churches were founded and established."²¹

Also like Luther, Calvin thought of justification not as merely one doctrine among many, but as the heart of the dispute with Rome. Of this doctrine he said, "This is the main hinge on which religion turns. . . . For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God."²² All of the other abuses—pilgrimages, merits, satisfactions, penances, purgatory, tyranny, superstitions, and idolatry—flow from this fatal fountain of denying justification, Calvin argues pointedly. As for the pope

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

²¹ Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 1:125.

²² Calvin, *Institutes* 3.11.1.

and his retinue, “Did they not decide that their only security was in arms and cruelty?”²³

Distinctive Characteristics in Calvin’s Piety

Finally, Calvin also contributed a distinctively Reformed inflection of the catholic and evangelical faith and even contributed to an emerging consensus at a time of some internal incoherence. On the one hand, he disdained novelty and desired nothing more than unity of all the churches in the gospel. On the other hand, having cast off the pope, he was perturbed by the sycophantic tendency of many evangelicals—Reformed and Lutheran—to wrap themselves around a Protestant leader. “If I were never to dissent from Luther,” he wrote to the chancellor of Saxony, “to undertake the task of interpretation would be absurd.”²⁴ He also grew impatient with the partisans of Zwingli. By his own report, Calvin was unimpressed with Zwingli’s writing and in fact ignored it as long as possible.²⁵ “They flare into a rage if anyone dares to prefer Luther to Zwingli,” Calvin complained. “This is not harming Zwingli in any way, for if they are compared with each other, you yourself know how much Luther is to be preferred.”²⁶

We will encounter Calvin’s distinctive contributions along the way, some of which may be mentioned here.

First, Calvin insisted more than other Reformers that Scripture alone must determine faith and practice. Neither the pope nor the prince, but Christ by his Word, determines every aspect of the church’s doctrine, worship, life, and discipline. Beyond Scripture, the church has no authority to bind consciences.

Second, the formula “distinction without separation” pervades Calvin’s thinking. The ecumenical Creed of Chalcedon (AD 451) affirmed that the eternal Son assumed our flesh in such a way that the two natures are united in one person. Nevertheless, each nature retains the attributes proper to it—without separation *or* confusion. Drawing on the early fathers, Calvin’s christology—and the “distinction without separation” formula in particular—shapes his view not only of the relation between the saving reality and creaturely sign in the Supper, but also of the relation between God and the world, Christ’s saving office and the ministry of the church, and Christ

²³ Calvin, “Reply by John Calvin to Cardinal Sadoletto’s Letter,” 60.

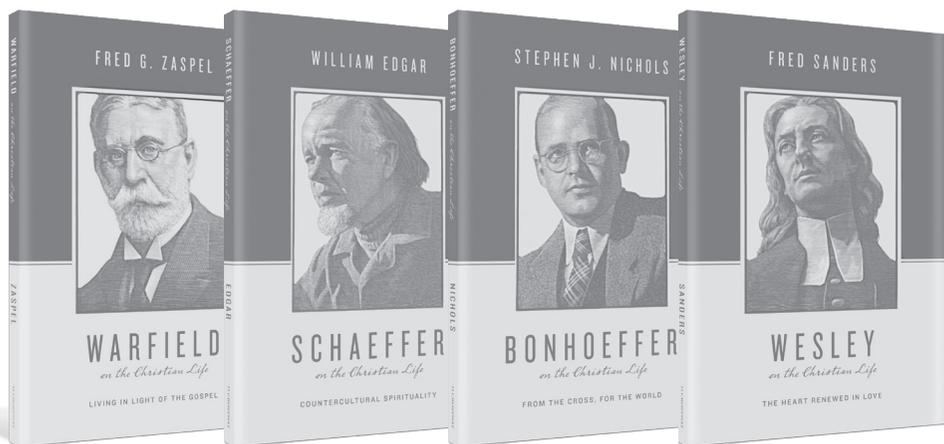
²⁴ Calvin, “To Francis Unhard” (Geneva, February 27, 1555), in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 6:154.

²⁵ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* (Tring, UK: Lion, 1975), 162.

²⁶ Calvin, quoted in *ibid.*, 154.

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