

Calvin

Theologian and Reformer

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by
Joel R. Beeke
and
Garry J. Williams



REFORMATION HERITAGE BOOKS
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Calvin, Theologian and Reformer

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Published by

Reformation Heritage Books

2965 Leonard St., NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49525

616-977-0889 / Fax 616-285-3246

e-mail: orders@heritagebooks.org

website: www.heritagebooks.org

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Introduction

In 2009, five hundred years after John Calvin's birth, the John Owen Centre at London Theological Seminary held a conference to commemorate the life and work of the great Reformer. Calvin was born on July 10, so we were a little late when we gathered September 14 and 15 for the conference. Nonetheless, the event proved worth the wait. Afterward, a number of us felt that the papers presented at the conference were of sufficient quality and usefulness to merit wider dissemination. This volume contains the papers that were presented at the conference, albeit expanded and tidied up, but preserving something of the feel of live addresses intended primarily for the refreshment of pastors.

A few introductory words may help the reader to follow the rationale behind this particular selection of papers. The chapters are grouped into three sections: aspects of Calvin's life and work; his teaching on doctrine and experience; and his teachings on the Christian life and ministry. The book begins with Sinclair Ferguson's account of the life of Calvin. If you have not read Calvin's story before, you will find Ferguson's introduction accessible and thorough in covering the key details. If you know the story already, you will find this introduction a helpful reminder of its main elements. Towards the end of the chapter, Ferguson cites important lessons from the reformation of Geneva, finding it rooted in prayer and the Word.

The theme of Calvin the Reformer is explored in the second chapter by Ian Hamilton. Hamilton shows us how Calvin was subdued by God. This theme of the remarkable way Calvin was mastered by

Christ to spend his life serving Jesus Christ kept emerging during the conference. This self sacrifice is expressed in Calvin's personal emblem: a heart offered by hand to God. Calvin's example challenges us to lay down all of our time and energy in serving Christ. This chapter also draws attention to the ways Calvin's reforming work was motivated by a series of concerns. These concerns speak directly to the circumstances of our own times: his emphasis on worship to our worship wars; his insistence on doctrine to our doctrinal indifferentism; his longing for the peace of the church to the volleys of Reformed friendly fire; his passion for theological education to our pragmatic preference for the immediately practical; and his commitment to the Great Commission to our evangelistic timidity.

Tony Lane next introduces us to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He describes the background of these editions, their different editions and English translations, their purpose, structure, and nature. He then entices us with some examples of Calvin's teaching, including some surprising and puzzling details. This chapter whets the appetite for more Calvin, in this case for more of his work in the *Institutes*. While wanting us to read the *Institutes* itself, Lane emphasizes Calvin's engagement with Scripture in a way that reminds us that Calvin was first and foremost concerned with the exposition of the Bible. The *Institutes* was intended to complement his commentaries and to serve the exposition of Scripture in the church.

With Calvin's writing in view, Paul Wells then provides the first of two essays on Calvin's doctrine, examining his teaching on union with Christ. Wells sets the wider context of this doctrine, explaining how the Incarnation of the Mediator bridges the gulf between the Creator and the creature, between God and man. He then looks at two fruits of the Incarnation. The first is the union of man to God that results from the Incarnation. The second is the distinction but not separation of justification and sanctification as the fruits of that union. Wells then explains three of Calvin's metaphors for union with Christ, exploring them from Calvin's comments on three biblical passages: engrafting from John 15:1–11, participation from Romans 6:1–11, and adoption from Romans 8:13–17. From this evidence, Wells concludes that union with Christ is the heart of Calvin's understanding of the gospel.

He leaves us with a richer understanding of what that means and how it functions within Calvin's theology.

Sinclair Ferguson writes the next chapter, exploring Calvin's teaching on the Holy Spirit. He shows how a particular doctrine can be pervasive in a theology without it having its own marked section or heading. It is especially striking to see how central the theology of the Holy Spirit was in Calvin's rejection of Roman Catholic theology. If we are to avoid propelling people who are hungry for the Holy Spirit into charismatic excess as the only place where He appears to be found, then it is vital that we emulate Calvin in his emphasis.

Calvin was supremely concerned about living out the gospel, so it is fitting that the book ends with two chapters concerning Christian life and ministry. Both of these are written by Joel Beeke, who served as my co-editor of this volume. In his first chapter, Beeke, together with the aid of Ray Pennings, proposes Calvin's emphasis on *pietas* as an alternative to the standard taxonomy of views on the role of Christians in society. Beeke and Pennings remind us of the broad outlines of the taxonomy before exploring the details of Calvin's teaching on piety. They show how Calvin was coherently religious and political, and provide a stimulating example of how debates that have been fixed in patterns can benefit from being considered in new perspectives. Calvin, writing long before modern classifications emerged, shows us how to maintain the importance of Christian engagement in a way that addresses criticisms that are levelled by those who favor a more separated approach.

For all his promotion of pious living, Calvin longed most to see the world reached with the Word. His theological works such as the *Institutes* were intended for preachers. Beeke's second chapter on Calvin the preacher is thus especially fitting to end the book. While the chapter includes some humbling facts about the extent of Calvin's preaching ministry, it also excites us with a refreshing vision of the power of preaching, according to Calvin. Preachers will find real encouragement here to persevere in their own ministry of the Word.

It was a pleasure to gather with hundreds of other men at the John Owen Centre conference. The speakers came from the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, and there were delegates

from all over the world. We experienced some of the unity that we have as Christ's people, as well as the mutual encouragement for which we have been given one another. Our prayer is that some of the blessing that we experienced at the conference will be felt by readers of these papers, and that we will be left saying with John Calvin, *Cor meum tibi offero Domine prompte et sincere* ("My heart, O Lord, I offer to Thee, promptly and sincerely").

— Garry J. Williams
Director, The John Owen Centre
for Theological Study, London