

***John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, & Doxology.*** Edited by Burk Parsons (Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008). Pp. 257. Reviewed by Ben Robinson

If you love the Lord Jesus Christ, if you enjoy reading about God's grace and power in the life of a fellow Christian so significant in church history, if you want to go deeper in your understanding of God's Word, you will want to pick up a copy of this book and reflect on the nineteen articles examining the life and work of John Calvin.

Burk Parsons, of Ligonier Ministries, edited the articles written by a cross section of Reformed theologians and teaching pastors. A survey of the contributors serves as a "Who's Who" of contemporary Reformed scholarship. There is a further list of tremendous Christian brothers who wrote sterling endorsements and the entire work is dedicated to Dr. R. C. Sproul.

As a whole, the book compiles some of the best thinking and research about John Calvin and his relationship with Jesus. The articles demonstrate good scholarship and serve as a concise "Calvin" bibliography—of the 257 pages, about 35 pages are endnotes and indices. If you enjoy history, there are ample notes and bibliographic "rabbit trails" for further study. Allow me to move quickly over the opening articles and pique your interest with points from the middle ones.

The opening articles give a solid picture of John Calvin as a person, not merely the data of a resume. The articles are intent on reflecting the work of God's grace in John Calvin's heart, illustrating his humility and passion for God.

Further into the book, the next biographical articles zero in and explore John Calvin as a Reformer, a churchman, a preacher of God's Word, a counselor, and a writer for the people of God. Under the consideration of Calvin as a reformer, I was struck by Dr. Hart's consideration of reform, of first how fragile it was politically and then on the personal level of the Genevan citizens how their attitude and actions were changed by the Gospel. On one hand, Calvin's Geneva turned and chased him out of town. On the other hand, as a result of Gospel preaching and congregational nurture the city's illegitimate births plummeted, 30% of the newborns received Old Testament names (compared to 3% before Calvin arrived), and profanity practically ceased. These were a matter of public city records.

As a churchman, Dr. Reeder bears out the interesting note that Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* developed the place of church government, the nature of leadership, and the duties of citizenship and church membership. This document initiated what we call today the "separation of church and state." Calvin himself juggled the varied roles of pastor, teacher, superintendant of education, and writer. Why was John Calvin so engaged and so productive? Theologically, we conclude only by and through the grace of God. On a personal level, Calvin had a motto, "I offer my heart to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely." As noted, by God's grace, this was more than his slogan, it was his life, and it ought to inspire us.

Perhaps you too, would be surprised with John Calvin's preaching schedule and practice: Dr. Lawson confirms that he preached from the New Testament on Sunday mornings, the Psalms on Sunday afternoons, and from the Old Testament every morning of the week, every other week. Calvin's approach was to preach sequentially, verse by verse through book after book of God's Word in an expository fashion. It is recorded that John Calvin picked up where he had to leave off when he returned from his Strasbourg exile to Geneva. The sermons were said to be weighty: Beza commented, "Every word was a pound."

John Calvin's counsel as a pastor rested on his doctrine of God's providence. Dr. W. Robert Godfrey shows us Calvin's strong identification with the emotions expressed by David in the Psalms and how they teach the vital lesson that the Christian will suffer for his Lord in this life and how to do so. Regarding the Psalms, Godfrey quotes Calvin, [they are] "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul, for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated." Calvin's letters are the best and actual examples of his counsel. Dr. Godfrey examines two counseling situations: first, a letter to a father grieving over his son's death and second to several letters written over a six month period to a man facing persecution, arrest, and eventual martyrdom. The letters are deep expressions of realism and sensitive compassion and empathy.

Throughout his writings and sermons, Calvin sought to lift up the Lord Jesus Christ first and foremost. One of the most "endnoted" articles, "The Supremacy of Christ," demonstrates that it was Calvin who developed the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king as a way of presenting the different roles of Christ as the Mediator.

The "five points" of Calvinism that come to us from the Synod of Dort are developed for us and helpful quotations rendered in full articles under the following titles:

*Man's Radical Corruption* – Total Depravity  
*Election and Reprobation* – Unconditional Election  
*Redemption Defined* – Limited Atonement  
*Transforming Grace* – Irresistible Grace  
*A Certain Inheritance* – Perseverance/Preservation of the Saint

For those who see the "New Perspectives" issue of our day as mere semantics or trivial, I would encourage you to read more of John Calvin, or this book's article, *The Principal Article of Salvation*. Christ was central to John Calvin's thinking, and by his own testimony he regarded justification as "'the primary article of the Christian religion', 'the main hinge on which religion turns', and 'the principal article of the whole doctrine of salvation and the foundation of all religion.'" Calvin and Luther are tight on Justification by Faith Alone.

Michael Horton goes on in the article to unfold Calvin's logic from *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book III, chapters 11-19 and commentary on Romans as follows:

1. To save us from judgment, the Son became flesh and merited our salvation (2.15-17).
2. Thus, the righteousness by which we are saved is alien to us (3.11.2).
3. Yet Christ must not only be given for us; he must be given to us (3.1.1).
4. We are recipients not only of Christ's gifts but of Christ himself with his gifts (3.1.1; 3.1.4; 3.2.23; 4.17.11).
5. Faith unites us to Christ (3.1.1), but it is the Holy Spirit who gives faith, and it is Christ who always remains the sole ground of salvation rather than faith itself.

Calvin argued that God's justifying righteousness was not an infused quality, nor a process of moral transformation, but a gift of an alien righteousness. This righteousness "consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness." Horton concludes, "If Luther was the 'apostle' of the Reformation, as Calvin said, there can be little doubt that Calvin was a 'Timothy' who refined the doctrine of justification that we find in our confessions.

On a personal note, I was blessed and challenged by the closing two articles and will comment on one. *The True Christian Life* opens quickly to this: “Holiness consists in conformity to Christ. Calvin writes, ‘Because the Father has reconciled us to Himself in Christ, therefore He commands us to be conformed to Christ as our pattern... Unless we **ardently** and prayerfully devote ourselves to Christ’s righteousness we do not only faithlessly revolt from our Creator, but we also **abjure** Him as our Savior.’” Charles Bridges goes on to explain:

This is strong language. The word *ardently* conveys the idea of eager zealousness, or as we might say, ‘going all out’ or ‘giving 100 percent.’ The word *abjure* means ‘to renounce strongly,’ as in Peter’s third denial of the Lord when he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know the man’ (Matt 26:74).

Bridges reveals Calvin’s strong motivation for such an ardent pursuit of Christ-likeness:

- God has revealed himself as a Father; therefore, we should behave as his children.
- Christ has purified us through his blood; therefore, we should not become defiled by fresh pollution.
- Christ has united us to his body as his members; therefore, we should not disgrace him by any blemish.
- Christ has ascended to heaven; therefore, we should leave our carnal desires behind and lift our hearts upward to him.
- The Holy Spirit has dedicated us as temples of God; therefore, we should exert ourselves not to profane his sanctuary, but to display his glory.
- Both our soul and body are destined to inherit an incorruptible and never-fading crown; therefore, we should keep them pure and undefiled.

Especially helpful are Dr. Bridges’ citations of Calvin’s emphasis on self-denial and cross-bearing. Here is an aspect of personal holiness we seldom think about: “in humility count others more significant than yourselves (Phil 2:3).” This passage is a take-off point for Calvin. Excellent citations affirm that a part of self-denial necessitates at least two principles: one, we should be “hard” on ourselves and gentle towards others; and two, we should actively seek the good and profit of others being ready to give up our “rights.” It is my position that both are necessary components of being “reformed and fit to live with.” John Calvin’s personal piety, humility, and ministry zeal radiate those principles to the glory of God.

If you are quite familiar with John Calvin, his life, and his works, you will be blessed, encouraged, and challenged by this book. If you are new to Calvin you will find great material in an engaging format. If you are somewhere in between, like me, you’ll be blessed and compelled to dust of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and read them more closely again!