

Bruce Gordon. *Calvin.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xiii + 398 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-12076-9.



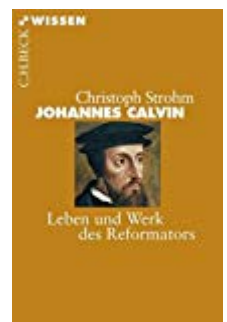
Wilhelm H. Neuser. *Johann Calvin: Leben und Werk in seiner Frühzeit 1509-1541.* Reformed Historical Theology Series. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009. 352 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-525-56915-3.



Volker Reinhardt. *Die Tyrannei der Tugend: Calvin und die Reformation in Genf.* Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009. 271 pp. EUR 24.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-406-57556-3.



Christoph Strohm. *Johannes Calvin: Leben und Werk des Reformators.* Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009. 128 pp. EUR 8.95, paper, ISBN 978-3-406-56269-3.



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The year 2009 was the five hundredth anniversary of Jean Calvin's birth, and the year was marked by a spate of conferences and books devoted to Geneva's reformer. These four books, all of them written by scholars working in Europe, are among the many publications intended to reevaluate Calvin's life. They are by no means the only biographies of the Genevan reformer to be published in 2009, but they represent the diverse perspectives that one can take in explaining Calvin's significance to a twenty-first-century audience.[1] Writing a biography of Calvin is not as easy a task as one might think. Unlike his older contemporary Martin Luther, he was remarkably reticent about himself, and in comparison to the correspondence of other reformers, his letters contain little that gives a sense of his personality. His biographers must therefore try to fill in the details in other ways. Each of the works reviewed here takes a different approach to its subject, and each of them is valuable for a different reason.

Only two of the books, those by Christoph Strohm and Bruce Gordon, are biographies in the strict sense of the word. In many ways, they represent opposite approaches to presenting the life of Geneva's reformer to a broad audience. Strohm holds the chair in church history at the University of Heidelberg, while Gordon was associated with the Institute for Reformation History within the history faculty at St. Andrews University in Scotland, although he has since moved to Yale Divinity School. Strohm's research has concentrated on the Reformed tradition as it was shaped by Genevan theologians and jurists in the generation after Calvin, while Gordon has published on Zurich and the Reformation in German-speaking Switzerland. Thus although neither has written extensively on Calvin before, they both bring to their respective biographies a deep understanding of the religious and cultural context in which Calvin lived and worked. Both are aware of the many negative

stereotypes associated with Calvin, and they take pains not necessarily to excuse Calvin but to explain him to their readers. Aside from this general goal, however, the two biographies are quite different in their presentation. Strohm's book, only about one hundred pages in a small format, could perhaps be best described as an extended essay that will be especially appreciated by specialists, although it may also appeal to a broader audience curious about Calvin. Gordon has written a much longer and more detailed treatment of the reformer's life intended for a popular audience but with a scholarly foundation that should satisfy specialists.

For all its brevity, Strohm's biography is an elegant introduction to Calvin. Because he does not have room to waste words, Strohm's presentation is direct and to the point. As the subtitle suggests, the focus is on Calvin's life and work rather than on his theology. The presentation of Calvin is sympathetic, but it is by no means hagiographic. Underlying the narrative is a firm grasp of the most recent research on Calvin. Although Strohm does not go into the historiographical debates in detail, he lets readers know what issues are discussed among scholars. The book is aimed at those wanting to learn more about Calvin as one of the most influential figures of the sixteenth century, and it assumes a certain level of historical knowledge and intellectual sophistication on the part of the reader.

A full third of the book is devoted to the years leading up to Calvin's arrival in Geneva in 1536, the period during which information about Calvin is most sparse. Yet this section is also the most effective portion of the biography in laying out the intellectual underpinnings of Calvin's thought: the development of French humanism and the innovations in the study of law being debated during the years when Calvin was a law student in Orléans and Bourges. Strohm summarizes Calvin's

first period in Geneva, from 1536 to 1538, in just a few pages, and then, in a chapter entitled "Calvin Becomes Calvin," he describes in more detail the importance of his three years in Strasbourg both for the development of his theology and for his practical experience as leader of a church. The rest of the book describes Calvin's career after his return to Geneva in 1541. Strohm first describes the earlier, more turbulent period to 1555, looking especially at the establishment of the consistory to oversee religious and moral life and at the conflicts that resulted from the consistory's exercise of church discipline. Strohm also briefly summarizes Calvin's conflicts with Sebastian Castellio, Jerome Bolsec, and Michael Servetus, which led the reformer to elaborate his understanding of predestination and the Trinity and to defend the persecution of heretics. Calvin's situation in Geneva became much more secure in 1555, when his supporters consolidated their control over the city's government. Strohm mentions the founding of the Genevan Academy, the spread of the Reformed faith in France, and the renewal of the controversy over the Lord's Supper as some of the most significant developments during the last decade of Calvin's life. In a final chapter, Strohm sums up Calvin's theology: in addition to humanism and the study of law, Strohm points to the influence of Augustine, Luther, and the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer on Calvin's interpretation of St. Paul; he emphasizes God's majesty and fellowship with Christ as two of the most important themes in Calvin's theology; and he sketches the ways in which Calvin's theology had a broader impact on culture. One cannot do a better job of summing up Calvin's life in such a brief space, and those who read German are fortunate to have such a concise and insightful work.

Although Gordon divides Calvin's life into roughly the same stages as Strohm, his biography has a much different flavor. With no restraints on length, Gordon is free to expand on ideas and go into greater detail about various aspects of Calvin's life and thought. He writes in a flowing,

even breezy, style intended to draw the reader into the topic. Where an English translation of Strohm's biography might be too demanding for the average American undergraduate, that is precisely the audience most likely to benefit from Gordon's biography.

While he takes pains to explain the historical setting, Gordon does not make the book into a "life and times" account; his focus remains on Calvin himself. In comparison to Strohm, he spends much less time on Calvin's early life and much more on the years after the reformer's return to Geneva in 1541, and he is particularly interested in Calvin's connections to developments outside of Geneva. He does not neglect Calvin's influence on the city, and he gives an extended discussion of Calvin's tenuous position in Geneva during the early 1550s. Nevertheless, Gordon makes clear by his choice of topics that Calvin was a prominent reformer within Europe. The condemnation and burning of Servetus is not simply a Genevan matter but gains broader publicity through the debate with Castellio over the punishment of heretics. There are two chapters on Calvin's role in the Eucharistic controversy. The first describes his efforts to maintain a mediating position between the Lutherans and the Swiss and the circumstances that led to his agreement with Zurich on the Lord's Supper in 1549. The second discusses his polemical exchange with the Lutheran Joachim Westphal through the 1550s. Gordon also devotes two chapters to Calvin's relations with France, describing the reformer's condemnation of the "Nicodemites" who dissembled their evangelical faith in the 1540s, his response to the deteriorating political situation after the death of Henry II in 1559, and the outbreak of civil war two years later. Calvin's epistolary contacts with the British Isles, the Netherlands, Poland, and the Palatinate are also discussed, although, as Gordon points out, much of the reformer's impact in these places came after his death.

Gordon does not separate discussion of Calvin's theology from his life but instead weaves it into the narrative. In refreshing contrast to most discussions of Calvin, the 1539 commentary on Romans receives more attention than the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, whether in its first (1536) or its final (1559) form. He also draws attention to Calvin's importance as a writer: the appeal of his theological works was enhanced by his elegant humanist Latin, while the French version of the *Institutes* helped shape the French language. Thanks to Calvin, Geneva became a major printing center in the 1550s. While acknowledging Calvin's faults, Gordon's presentation of Calvin is essentially positive. He was irascible but brilliant, moved by strong likes and dislikes, loyal to friends but implacable toward opponents, burdened by a heavy workload and increasingly hampered by poor health. Gordon uses citations from letters and published sermons to give a sense of Calvin's personality, and he occasionally extrapolates from the reformer's self-identification with King David and the apostle Paul in his commentaries to give insight into his psychological state. Gordon takes the approach of a teacher conveying a broad picture to his readers, and as a result his biography succeeds in explaining Calvin in a way that is accessible to a general audience.

If Gordon's Calvin is international, Volker Reinhardt's Calvin is firmly rooted in Geneva, and his book, *Die Tyrannie der Tugend*, is less a biography of Calvin than it is a history of Geneva during Calvin's day. Reinhardt, who holds a chair in history at the University of Fribourg, is also an early modernist, but his field of research is Renaissance Italy rather than Reformed Switzerland. This in turn has consequences for his presentation of Calvin, which is darker than that of either Strohm or Gordon. While the latter two try to counter negative stereotypes and modern prejudices against the Genevan reformer, Reinhardt builds on and even reinforces them in his depiction of Geneva at the time of Calvin. Moreover, he has very little sensitivity to or interest in the de-

velopment of Calvin's theology. Thus when discussing Calvin's preaching during his first period in Geneva in the 1530s, he draws his material not from the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* but from the final 1559 version, and he concentrates on Calvin's understanding of predestination, ignoring the fact that the position in the 1559 *Institutes* was a reflection of theological conflicts from the 1540s and 1550s and so does not necessarily tell us what Genevans heard in the 1530s. The best recent research on Calvin has emphasized the development of the reformer's thought within the context of his life, and it has rejected the view of predestination as the central doctrine around which his theology was formulated.[2] Both of these developments in Calvin studies are reflected in the works by Strohm and Gordon. Reinhardt's focus on predestination and his perception of Calvin's theology as static unfortunately demonstrates the tenacity of the older approach to Calvin among those not specifically interested in his theology. What makes up for Reinhardt's deficiencies with regard to Calvin's theology is his detailed description of the political and social turmoil that already characterized Geneva by the 1520s and continued into the mid-1550s. His familiarity with the factionalism that marked the city-republics of Renaissance Italy has given him a particular sensitivity to the role of factionalism in shaping Calvin's Geneva.

Reinhardt devotes virtually no space to Calvin's life before 1536 and instead looks at the rivalries and political divisions within Geneva during the first third of the sixteenth century. Wedged between Savoy and Bern, and with the bishop, its nominal overlord, a client of the Duke of Savoy, Geneva was divided between those who favored alliance with the Swiss Confederation to increase the city's autonomy and those loyal to Savoy's interests. Bern's official conversion to Protestantism in 1528 opened the way for evangelical preaching in Geneva, and Reinhardt gives a lively account of the popular protest, polemic, and polarization in Geneva during the early

1530s, up to the city's virtually simultaneous rejection of the mass and the rule of the bishop in 1535. These twin decisions were made more secure by Bern's conquest of the Vaud early the following year. Reinhardt uses rival accounts in contemporary Catholic and Reformed chronicles to depict the impact of the Reformation and popular reaction, both for and against, to the changes introduced by Calvin after his arrival in that city. His colleague Guillaume Farel, who was arguably more important than Calvin during this period, receives short shrift here. Reflecting his interest in Geneva rather than in Calvin, Reinhardt says little about the reformer's stay in Strasbourg, describing instead the political developments in Geneva between 1538 and 1541. To some extent, all this is background, however, since Reinhardt's central concern is what happens in Geneva after Calvin's return in 1541. He focuses especially on the disciplinary activities of the consistory and the opposition to Calvin among the city's inhabitants, especially a faction of the political and social elite. Like Strohm and Gordon, Reinhardt sees the election of 1555 as key to the removal of Calvin's opponents from power, but more so than the other historians, he highlights its importance for creating a new political elite that would assume control of Geneva in the last decade of Calvin's life. Their political support of Calvin, and their willingness to cooperate with the pastors in the consistory and in the supervision of poor relief enabled the imposition and enforcement of new standards of belief and behavior—the "tyranny of virtue" in the book's title. In a final chapter Reinhardt briefly sketches both the history of Geneva and the influence of Geneva's church in France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and England (and ultimately its American colonies), and he discusses the key role in the modernization process given to Calvinism by Max Weber and, more indirectly, by the confessionalization thesis so influential in early modern scholarship.

Although Reinhardt tries to sum up the positive side of Calvinist discipline for the creation of

modern society, he cannot overcome his fundamental antipathy for Calvin. This, ultimately, is the biggest problem with the book. Reinhardt allows his twenty-first-century prejudices to color his evaluation of a sixteenth-century movement. As a result, he cannot satisfactorily explain the appeal of Calvinism either to the substantial number of Genevans who conformed to the expectations of the ministers or to those outside of Geneva who voluntarily converted to Calvinism. This point is all the more significant given the fact that in most places where it spread, the Reformed church did not have government support and in some places suffered from active persecution. One is left to wonder why contemporaries might have been attracted to Calvin's teaching or have seen the church's position in Geneva as anything but a tyranny, whether virtuous or not. More recent work on the Genevan consistory, especially by Robert M. Kingdon and his students, has stressed the consistory's importance for conflict resolution and the maintenance of social and domestic harmony, but this aspect escapes Reinhardt's notice entirely.[3] Reinhardt's failure to cite the works that helped shape his interpretation is even more frustrating. Those familiar with not only Kingdon's work but also the studies of E. William Monter and William G. Naphy, for instance, will recognize their importance for Reinhardt's narrative. Reinhardt does list their works in his selected bibliography, but, with few exceptions, he limits his use of footnotes to his occasional direct quotations from Calvin.[4] While such sparse use of citations makes his book less useful to scholars, it makes the book more appealing to a popular audience, who will find in it a lively picture of religious change in Geneva during Calvin's lifetime.

In contrast to the first three books, Wilhelm H. Neuser's *Johann Calvin: Leben und Werk in seiner Frühzeit 1509-1541* is published within an academic series and intended specifically for Calvin specialists. As professor of church history at the University of Münster, Neuser helped shape scholarship on Calvin and Calvinism in Germany

until his death in 2010. His book is particularly useful as a synthesis of existing research on the early Calvin, deepened with his own insights into Calvin's theological development. It is intended to update and even replace Alexandre Ganoczy's *The Young Calvin*, first published in French in 1966.[5] Ganoczy's study ends with Calvin's exile from Geneva in 1538. By extending the period covered to 1541, Neuser is able to consider the important Strasbourg years as well. As he acknowledges in his preface, he is aided significantly in the study of Calvin's early years by the availability of new sources.

Rather than giving a narrative account of Calvin's early life, Neuser describes in detail the historical circumstances in which Calvin grew up and produced his earliest works. He cites Calvin frequently and at length in German, so that the (future) reformer is allowed to speak for himself in the language of the reader rather than in his original Latin or French. Neuser describes Calvin's much-cited *subita conversio ad docilitatem* (sudden conversion to teachability) as a new openness to the gospel rather than as a dramatic experience akin to St. Paul's conversion, and he places it as early as 1527 or 1528, much earlier than most scholars. Like Strohm, he discusses French humanism as the intellectual milieu in which Calvin was educated, but he focuses more specifically on the reform circle associated with the king's sister, Marguerite of Navarre, and Guillaume Briçonnet, the bishop of Meaux. He also stresses the strong opposition these moderate reformers faced from the theologians of the Sorbonne and the importance of political events—for example, the king's presence or absence in Paris—for determining the relative strength of the two parties. These events were particularly important during the early 1530s, when Calvin finished his legal studies, published his first book—a commentary on Seneca's *de clementia*—and became involved with the reformist circle. His links to the Meaux circle are attested to by six sermons now attributed to him that were included in an ex-

panded edition of sermons by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (Faber Stapulensis).

Neuser sees evidence of Calvin's break with the Meaux group and his shift to a more explicitly evangelical position in the prefaces he provided for the French Bible translation published by his cousin Pierre Olivétan in 1535. Neuser discusses the first edition of the *Institutes* at length, describing Calvin's criticism of Ulrich Zwingli's (and Bucer's) understanding of the Lord's Supper and arguing that Philip Melancthon's *Loci Communes* (1521), rather than Luther's small catechism, was the inspiration for the discussion of law and gospel. Neuser does not say much about Calvin's first period in Geneva, although he does compare the catechism of 1537/38 with the earlier *Institutes* and discusses Calvin's evolving understanding of the Lord's Supper as the result of his earliest interactions with Bucer. This evolution was accelerated after Calvin's move to Strasbourg in 1538, as reflected in his *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* of 1541. Neuser also highlights the importance of the second edition (1539) of the *Institutes*, largely neglected by scholars because there is no critical edition of it. Finally, he describes Calvin's involvement in the religious colloquies with Catholics within the Holy Roman Empire, which brought him into contact with all of the leading German reformers except Luther. The book ends abruptly with a very brief discussion of the changed circumstances in Geneva that led to Calvin's return there in September 1541. There is no conclusion or even a summary of the book's most important findings.

Due to the technical nature of Neuser's discussion, those new to Calvin studies might find his book heavy going. He interacts directly with other authors in the body of the work rather than in the footnotes, and the level of detail descends at times to minutiae. There are various indications that the book was prepared for publication in haste, such as the numerous typographical errors that should have been caught at the copyediting stage

of production. There is no general index, only an index of names. The lack of a bibliography is particularly regrettable in view of the rather abbreviated form in which citations are given in the footnotes. But these technical details are only minor complaints that should not detract from the major scholarly achievement of the book, which summarizes, evaluates, and builds on the past generation of research to present a more detailed picture of Calvin's early life and career.

Each one of the books reviewed here differs from the other three in some way, whether in length, language, scope, or target audience. At the same time, there is also a good deal that all four books have in common in their presentation of Calvin. Those commonalities reflect the international character of the best work presently being done on Geneva's reformer as well as the significant interaction between scholars working in theology and history faculties over the past few decades. All three of the authors writing for a more popular audience highlight Calvin's long-term importance for European—and eventually world—history, while Neuser's detailed discussion of Calvin's early years will be extremely useful for future biographers. If the goal of an anniversary celebration is to make what is past understandable to the present and useable for the future, then the celebration of Calvin's birth can be said to have succeeded admirably.

Notes

[1]. To give just a few examples of other new biographies by European scholars of the Reformation, the Swiss church historian Peter Opitz has written a brief biography, *Leben und Werk Johannes Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009) whose intended audience is similar to that of Christoph Strohm's work, while the more popular biography of the Dutch church historian Herman Selderhuis is available in English translation, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009). The 2001 biography of another Dutch church historian, Willem van't

Spijker, was also translated into English and published in 2009: *Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

[2]. For instance, Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Thomas J. Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God: The Development of Calvin's Eucharistic Teaching* (New York: AMS Press, 1995); and Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

[3]. For a useful brief introduction, see Robert M. Kingdon, "The Geneva Consistory in the Time of Calvin," in *Calvinism in Europe 1540-1620*, ed. Andrew Pettegree, Alastair Duke, and Gillian Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 21-34.

[4]. Representative are E. William Monter, "The Consistory of Geneva, 1559-1569," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 38 (1976): 467-484; and William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

[5]. Alexandre Ganoczy, *Le jeune Calvin: Genèse et évolution de sa vocation réformatrice* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1966); and Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

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