



Reviews



Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought, Willem van't Spijker, translated by Lyle D. Bierma, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pp. x, 197, ISBN 978-0664232252. £16.99

Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed, Paul Helm, London: T&T Clark, 2008, pp. x, 175, ISBN 978-0567032027. £14.99

These two books, by Willem van't Spijker and Paul Helm respectively, represent only a tiny fraction of the avalanche of 'Calviniana' that has been published to coincide with the quinqucentenary of Calvin's birth. In particular, such introductions and guides have proliferated, even though Helm exhibits a certain distaste for the secondary literature that surrounds and – he feels – at times obscures Calvin.

Both writers agree that Calvin himself in fact rejected the use of the term 'Calvinism' and the debates have continued about the extent to which 'Calvinism' reflects its founder. Perhaps such perplexity was inevitable: Calvin died on 27th May 1564, and, as Spijker notes, 'No stone was placed on his grave. The person would lie hidden behind his work'. (124) Calvin, suggested Ford Lewis Battles, 'was captive to his own time and place, but also [transcended] the sixteenth century. The more I study [him] the more contemporary I discover him to be, and the more dated I find so called "contemporary theology" to be' (see "The Future of Calviniana", in *Renaissance, Reformation, Resurgence*, ed. Peter de Klerk, 1976, p. 134). Calvin studies have often been marked by this tension between the historical and the doctrinal, between the historian and the theologian – a tension which is evident in the contrast between the two books under review.

In lucid and highly readable prose (translated by Lyle Bierma from the Dutch manuscript), Spijker attempts to strike a balance between history and theology. However, he always exhibits an historian's

eye: each page is substantiated by copious references to the collected works and correspondence of Calvin and the Reformers, with a comprehensive chapter bibliography of further reading. The material is ordered chronologically, setting it in context; indeed, Calvin does not make an appearance until chapter two, following a brief but useful exposition of France in the sixteenth century. That exposition ably demonstrates the necessity and value of the dedicatory epistle to Francis I which Calvin wrote at the beginning of the *Institutes*, and which so many contemporary readers tend to skip over.

Helm, by contrast, is primarily a philosopher and theologian. John R. Franke attracts criticism from Helm for suggesting in his book *The Character of Theology* (2005) that ‘we must take account of the particular social and intellectual settings in which we engage in theological reflection and exploration.’ (Franke, p. 14) This, Helm feels, precedes ‘an all-too-familiar apologia for the need for us to be post-modernists in theology’. (24) His own book takes its cue from the twelfth-century work by Maimonides which gives the ‘Perplexed’ series its title, with a clear focus on Calvin’s *thought*, rather than on his character or career. ‘Happily’, writes Helm, ‘[we are] not going to recount the history of actual tensions in Calvin’s somewhat chequered personal history in Geneva’. (114) Its focus is not just on Calvin’s theology, but also on his ‘rather eclectic’ use of philosophical ideas. (18) Helm thus provides crucial insight regarding the place of Thomas Aquinas and John Chrysostom in Calvin’s thought.

For Helm, the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* provides the interpretative key to Calvin’s thought. In his 2008 John Murray lecture delivered at the Highland Theological College, Helm argued that the ‘big idea’ that orients Calvin’s theology is not predestination, nor election nor grace, but is to be found in the first two sentences of the *Institutes*: ‘Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other’ (*Institutes*, I.1.1). It is this attention to the ‘big idea’ behind the man that informs Helm’s work: ‘We [...] remain’, he writes, ‘in the realm of Calvin’s ideas’ (114), and this new book is in effect a supplement to his 2004 book, *John Calvin’s Ideas*. Indeed,

a good portion of this new study is given over to an examination of the Reformed epistemology of the present-day American philosopher Alvin Plantinga, with frequent reference also to the nineteenth-century anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach.

However, as Helm himself notes, ‘Calvin is not a philosopher, handling inert data, concepts and arguments. He is confronted by the announcement of the will of the sovereign Creator and Redeemer’. (88) Both Helm and Spijker are clear that the *cognitio Dei et hominis* is the key theme of Calvin’s theology, while the *ordo salutis* provides the structure. Hence, in his preface to the 1545 *Institutes*, Calvin acknowledges his wish ‘to aid those who desire to be instructed in the doctrine of salvation’. (*Institutes*, p. xxxviii) Thereafter, his work represents the attempt to articulate the form of piety proper to that understanding, so that ultimately, the *Institutes* are pastoral in their intent: in Spijker’s words, they are designed as ‘an aid to spiritual growth’. (111) Calvin deplored the empty speculation (*nuda speculatio*) of late scholastic theology; the *Institutes*, Spijker suggests, ‘is not an unified construct [...] it is a living out of the truth itself [...] That is why no one has been able to give a satisfactory answer to the question of what philosophical method Calvin used’. (112) Spijker’s insight, that ‘Calvin’s theology in the *Institutes* is not a closed, well-rounded whole, subordinated to one central idea’ (113) perhaps explains the later disputes that overtook Calvinism and the anachronistic attempts which Helm notes to reconcile Calvin to later positions.

While the rigorous focus of Helm is laudable for the clarity it lends his presentation, it nonetheless risks downplaying the contextual and pastoral nature of Calvin’s thought. Moreover, Helm’s own passion for the final edition of the *Institutes* (curiously, in the older Beveridge translation) threatens to obscure the occasional and polemical character of much of his writings. As Wulfert de Greef has shown in *The Writings of John Calvin* (2008), the differences between the 1536 and the 1559 editions of the *Institutes* are considerable, both in their structure and their content. These differences reflect the influence of Calvin’s doctrinal debates with figures such as Joachim Westphal (on the Lord’s Supper), Osiander (on the *imago dei*) and Sozzini (on the bodily resurrection). Further, the trial of Michael Servetus highlights the tensions that had emerged between church and state, as well as the

influence of Calvin's personal character, both of which receive only passing mention from Helm.

As Spijker points out, the establishment and maintenance of church discipline was crucial to Calvin's return to Geneva, and the lack of attention to this issue in particular reveals an unfortunate weakness in Helm's approach. The result is that the reader is deprived of a proper understanding of the importance of the *Discipline Ecclesiastique*, whose forty articles became a defining mark of church polity in both the Netherlands and Scotland. The academy that began under Calvin and which later served as a model of university education across Europe was initially established 'for the church'. (Spijker, p. 110) Accordingly, one should ask whether Calvin's thought can ever be truly separable from its historical ecclesial practice. However, as Calvin himself observed regarding the relation between church and theology, 'it not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other'.

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Calvin, Bruce Gordon, New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2009, pp. xiii, 398, ISBN 978-0300120769. £25.00

The Quincentenary of the birth of Calvin has produced several notable biographies published for the occasion. Of particular note are the biographies published by two of the leading Dutch Calvin scholars, Herman J. Selderhuis and Willem van't Spijker. Compared to their works, Bruce Gordon's biography stands out as the most comprehensive and thoroughly researched, incorporating some of the most recent Calvin scholarship. While Gordon is not a specialist in Calvin studies, which he humbly admits in the acknowledgments, both his specialty in the Swiss Reformation and his familiarity with the ever-growing Calvin scholarship have resulted in one of the definitive Calvin biographies of this generation.