

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'.

*Jason Wardley,*

New College, University of Edinburgh



*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.

A major contribution of the work to the field of Calvin studies is the full picture which results from Gordon's indefatigable efforts to familiarize himself with Calvin's own writings, including his letters and biblical commentaries. At the same time, these writings do not stand isolated, but are carefully placed in their own socio-political, intellectual, and religious context. This is made possible by Gordon's comprehensive familiarity with the most recent Calvin scholarship. Gordon is clearly well acquainted with the intellectual history of Calvin produced by scholars such as Oberman, Muller, and Schreiner, as well as the socio-political history produced by scholars such as Kingdom, McKee, and Naphy.

When it comes to the intellectual history, Gordon succinctly delineates the French humanistic movement that played a significant role in Calvin's thought. Rather than speculating on the possible influence on Calvin of late medieval theologies, Gordon instead focuses on what can be known more or less for certain. As a result, he gives most attention to the French humanistic movement as it connected with political developments in France and in the Holy Roman Empire. In addition to the intellectual background, Gordon does not leave out the direct theological influences on Calvin's work. For example, in his analysis of Calvin's 1539 *Institutes*, and following Richard Muller, Gordon identifies Melancthon as its primary influence. (91 f.) Then in chapter seven, Gordon treats in detail Calvin's 1541 *Commentary on Romans*, analyzing the influence of contemporary theologians such as Melancthon, Bullinger, and Bucer, as well as that of the church fathers and the medieval doctors. (104–8) While Gordon's analysis of Calvin's commentary is helpful, it might have benefited from an interaction with Joel Kok's PhD thesis under David Steinmetz, "The Influence of Martin Bucer on John Calvin's Interpretation of Romans: A Comparative Case Study" (Duke, 1993). Kok's work discusses in detail how much more Melancthon, rather than Bucer, influenced Calvin's Romans commentary.

Gordon's familiarity with the socio-political context of sixteenth century Geneva and environs also helps to bring out a fuller picture of Calvin. While he left his mark, for good or bad, on the strong *theological* tradition called 'Calvinism', in his own context Calvin

was first and foremost a churchman along with Reformers from cities such as Wittenberg, Strasbourg, Zurich, Neuchâtel, and Lausanne. Calvin's theology was living and practical, as manifest in his *Ordinance*, catechism, liturgy, and sermons. (121–43) In turn, these works cannot be understood apart from Calvin's daily struggles with the socio-political structures of Geneva and Reformation Europe. The greatest struggle came when Calvin tried to maintain the freedom of the church, as opposed to the state, to impose church discipline on its members. To some extent, this was the cause of his first banishment from Geneva in 1538, and the subsequent development of the Consistory was a compromise between the church and the council of Geneva. Thus Calvin was unable to achieve complete freedom for the church from political influence, so that while his ministers were able to be a part of the Consistory, they had to be subject to the authority of the council. (127 f.) In his discussion of Calvin's sermons, Gordon brings out their fuller meaning through a delineation of the continual struggles between the Genevan council and the preachers. (139) As a result, Gordon's book serves as a helpful addition to the works by Elsie McKee and Randall Zachman which have previously focused on Calvin as pastor and church leader.

While his familiarity with both the intellectual and socio-political context of Calvin's life is highly informative, Gordon's close reading of Calvin's letters and commentaries against this contextual background sheds light on Calvin's complex life, thought, and even personality. In his letters, Calvin at times displayed a sense of superiority even towards his elders such as Martin Bucer and Guillaume Farel. At other times he showed his flexibility by trying his best to draw Melancthon or Bullinger into the same cause of furthering reformation. Moreover, his polemical writings reveal his relentless attempts to crush an opponent's arguments. And yet, his considerable debating skills did not always bring him victory: his debate during the 1550s with the Lutheran Joachim Westphal concerning the presence of Christ in communion turned out to be one of the disasters. (243–49) Gordon uses these writings to depict the fleshly Calvin who is confident, brilliant, and yet sometimes rash and far from invincible. This portrayal gives the impression of being closer to the real Calvin than that which is sometimes presented by either his enemies or his followers.

While this biography is a wonderful contribution to Reformation Studies in general, as well as being a plain ‘good read’ for anyone interested in Calvin, there are nevertheless a few points of contention. As the work’s strength is its comprehensiveness, so its weakness, if we have to find one, is its broad scope. Some discussions require longer treatment in order to be fair to the issues in question. For example, Gordon argues that Calvin showed ‘signs of modifying his position’ on resistance against rulers who persecute. (323 f.) Gordon uses the 1559 *Institutes* as his evidence, which ‘indicates that Calvin was prepared to consider resistance against a tyrant’. (324) However, when it comes to details, Gordon refers only to a single forthcoming article. While Calvin does mention the possibility of resisting a tyrant in the 1559 *Institutes*, the same passage is already present in the 1536 *Institutes*, and moreover, what Calvin encourages is a resistance by a legitimate lower magistrate, and not by individuals. Whether Calvin allows for individual resistance is a question whose answer must be sought in his later writings, and not in the 1559 *Institutes*.

Nevertheless, we do know that one should not seek everything in a book. Gordon’s work is a truly excellent, comprehensive, and at the same time, accessible biography of John Calvin. This work will certainly become one of the definitive Calvin biographies.

*Yoshi Kato,*  
Princeton Theological Seminary



*Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, J. Todd Billings, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. x, 218, ISBN 978-0199211876. £56.00

Calvin is not very fashionable these days. Scottish poet Edwin Muir (1887–1959) well captures the national antipathy to:

[...] King Calvin with his iron pen,  
And God three angry letters in a book,  
And there the logical hook