

Calvin Today

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE FUTURE
OF THE CHURCH

Edited by

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t&t clark

Published by T&T Clark International

A Continuum Imprint

The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane
Suite 704
New York NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-567-13693-0 (hardback)

Typeset by Amner International, Dublin, Ireland
Printed and bound in Great Britain

CONTENTS

List of Contributors	vii
Foreword	ix
Michael Welker/Michael Weinrich/Ulrich Möller	
Part I. Faith	
1 Faith – Introduction	3
Michael Beintker	
2 'For the Glory of God': Learning the Future of the Church from Paul	6
Beverly Roberts Gaventa	
3 Calvin as a Model for Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Illustrated with his Exegesis of 1 Tim. 4.1-5	15
Günther Haas	
4 Contemplating the Living Image of God in Creation	33
Randall C. Zachman	
5 How Calvinism Travelled to America: The Story of Susanna Bell	48
Susan Hardman Moore	
6 Calvin, Children and the Church	56
Herman J. Selderhuis	
7 Inconvenient, because Consistent, Theology: John Calvin and Karl Barth	65
Michael Weinrich	
Part II. Ecumenism	
8 Ecumenism – Introduction	83
Michael Weinrich	

9	Calvin's Concept of the Church and Present-Day Ecumenical Challenges André Birmelé	87
10	The World Alliance of Reformed Churches Today and the John Calvin Legacy Setri Nyomi	101
11	Not without the World Council of Churches: A Contribution to the History of the Catholic-Reformed International Bilateral Dialogue Odair Pedroso Mateus	110
12	Calvin's Theology: An Ecumenical Challenge Michael Beintker	127
13	Can Scripture Interpret Itself? Thoughts on the Relationship between the Interpretation of Scripture and Church Ministry in Calvin's Theology Stefan Scheld	141
Part III. Public Responsibility		
14	Public Responsibility – Introduction Michael Welker	155
15	On Self-Love. Impulses from Calvin and Calvinism for Life in Society? Dirkie Smit	158
16	<i>Meditatio futurae vitae</i> : A Spiritual Challenge for Church and Society? Fulvio Ferrario	181
17	Calvin's Interpretation of the Church as the 'Communion of Saints': A Challenge and Opportunity for Contemporary Reformed Churches Peter Opitz	190
18	Calvin's Doctrine of the 'Civil Government': Its Orienting Power in Pluralism and Globalization Michael Welker	206
	Index	215

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FOREWORD

The 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth was not just an occasion to remember the past. It was even more important to focus on the current significance of his legacy, which happens much more rarely. Historical studies loom large in the present day reception of Calvin, for understandable reasons. Recently, a host of historical analyses and biographical reconstructions have appeared on the subject of Calvin. Not least, the reasons for this are that, particularly in the German-language area, commentators have persistently misrepresented him, particularly his time in Geneva, even with malicious intent. This has made it practically impossible to engage appropriately with Calvin. Despite all the questions that remain unanswered, the numerous historical studies on the social situation of the city of Geneva in the sixteenth century enable us to form a sufficiently detailed picture that unmask the usual caricatures of Calvin and to some extent also 'Calvinism', showing them to be misrepresentations.

This volume deliberately looks in another direction. It attempts to trace back the present significance of Calvin for Reformed theology and the future of the church. The radiation and relevance of Calvin's work is tackled from different perspectives, sometimes directly, sometimes more indirectly through the choice of a certain focus on Calvin, characterized or challenged by topical questions. It is not simple transitions to directions for modern use that are under discussion, but substantive theological insights linking up in a stimulating way with today's theological debates and potential future. The chapters in this book show that concerning ourselves with his theology still has a most inspiring and motivating effect. Again and again, Calvin's consistent theology speaks with stringent clarity and sometimes even with liberating relevance and modernity.

We have structured the collection of papers under three thematic headings, which, inspired by Calvin, develop insights from Reformed theology for the future of the church: *faith – ecumenism – public responsibility*. They are not specific to Calvin; however, in each dimension, Calvin has something specific to say.

Faith – While Luther's theology first asks how human beings tormented by sin can find a merciful God, Calvin's theology changes the perspective and asks how God deals with the persistent presence of human sin. How do sinful humans justified by God respond to their creaturely calling in their new lives – in fellowship with Christ and in the life of the church as the body of Christ? For Calvin, the chief end of life is to know God and devote our life to his glory. The still topical point is that we are freed from our fixation with ourselves, thereby recognizing and living out our true reality in relation to God.

Ecumenism – The church unity already given in Christ is fundamental for Calvin and for Reformed theology. We must do our utmost to confess it and make it visible. If there is agreement in the understanding of God and grace, all other differences have no church-dividing importance. Calvin was a passionate advocate of cohesion between the churches, which had to express their 'being church' appropriately in the plurality of their differing contexts. That still characterizes Reformed understanding today: the deliberately open tradition of Reformed confession connects contextual authenticity with the catholicity of the church as a whole.

Public responsibility – Calvin, Reformed theology and Reformed churches pose the question about the church's public responsibility, as no other Reformer and churches do. How, based on justification by faith alone, can Christian life take shape in the congregation? And how can life rooted in this new justice prove itself in the conflict areas of society? Part 3 reveals the sources of the worldwide impact of Calvin's and Reformed theology on politics, the law, scholarship and the organizing of life in society, including civil society.

These papers stem from an international Calvin Symposium hosted by the Evangelical Church of Westphalia, at its conference centre, Haus Villigst, 16–18 March 2009. They were an international ecumenical contribution to the Calvin anniversary year. The organizers and editors were Michael Beintker, Michel Weinrich and Michael Welker, representing academic theology, and Gerd Kerl and Ulrich Möller for the Evangelical Church of Westphalia.

Its international and interdenominational character was particularly enriching. Experts presented from different contexts (USA, Canada, Scotland, Netherlands, France, Ghana, Brazil, South Africa, Italy, Switzerland and Germany) and denominational perspectives (United, Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, World Alliance of Reformed Churches and World Council of Churches) along with different theological disciplines. The Evangelical Church of Westphalia kindly enabled the translation of the German contributions into English.

The editors received immense support in the process of publishing these proceedings. In particular, Christina Schäfer went to great trouble in finding the standard English translations of the numerous references to

original sources, for which the editors and translators, Pat Benbow and Elaine Griffiths, are extremely grateful. We also thank Henning Mützlitz for the careful edition of the translated texts and Thomas Kraft from T&T UK for the good cooperation.

Heidelberg/Bochum/Bielefeld, Summer 2010

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