

Introduction

John Calvin in Context

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In 1995, David C. Steinmetz, one of the two deans of Calvin studies in America along with Robert M. Kingdon, published a slim volume entitled *Calvin in Context*. For Calvin studies, that volume became part of the necessary tools of the trade. Steinmetz brilliantly set forth the argument for the history of exegesis method for which he became famous. In so doing, he argued that attempting to understand Calvin apart from those who went before him, his theological and exegetical context, caused a variety of errors.¹

The present volume seeks to apply Steinmetz's insight, but on a far broader canvas. Certainly Calvin's theological and exegetical insights only take on their true shapes and colors when seen against the backdrop of the traditions out of which they are drawn, but that is just as true for other facets of his life. It was true for the Christianity in which he was formed, for the political realities that he faced, and for the materiality of Genevan life that made up the fabric of his everyday life.

Calvin's various early modern contexts force modern readers to recognize the thick character of his life and career. It is crucial to note the plurality of those contexts, for they influenced him throughout his life. At a single moment, Calvin would be balancing the concerns of northern humanism with the politics of Geneva as well as its relations with its neighbors in Switzerland, along with the polemic necessities of answering Rome or Lutherans or Anabaptists, and with the personalities of his contemporaries. Of course, that was before he would consider the necessities pressed upon him by the demands of explicating the text of scripture and applying it to the contexts of mid-sixteenth-century Geneva.

¹ David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

The most important cluster of issues for the student of Calvin comes from the necessity of placing Calvin firmly in his Genevan and intellectual contexts. Modern readers have a tendency to take the rhetoric of medieval and early modern authors as if they were speaking to the same cultural and mental world in which we live. But this is far from the truth. Calvin lived and worked in a town whose elected leaders believed that it was absolutely vital to the future of their city that they answered the religious questions of the day correctly. They could – and did – compel worship, attendance at catechism classes, and appearances before the church’s consistory. Further, the Genevans lived within sight of France, a country that had a sizeable minority of French Protestants, termed Huguenots. The very existence of these Huguenots infuriated some French Catholics, and the Wars of Religion began during Calvin’s life. Freedom of religion, a fact of life for modern readers whom many take as an obvious right, was a very different idea in Calvin’s time.

Given their importance and at times foreignness, this volume will concentrate upon the contextual issues that made up the world in which Calvin lived. Instead of taking the reader deeply into Calvin’s thought or into his particular doctrines as some recently published handbooks do in excellent fashion, *Calvin in Context* sets out to be quite different: to supply the background against which Calvin must be seen. This is admittedly curious. Why not concentrate upon Calvin, and his works? One answer to that comes from the history of exegesis school. This method argued that it was insufficient to know what a particular author had written about a particular passage of scripture. Without delving deeply into the prior exegetical traditions, especially those which an author could have known, or even better did know, it is impossible to answer a series of valuable theological and exegetical questions: Was the author being innovative? Conservative? Boorishly obvious? Truly unique? By considering the context of humanism, French Christianity, and the styles of theology that were significant during Calvin’s era, we find ourselves in a better place to appreciate his thought and life.

Having achieved a knowledge of the intellectual context, the scholar who would know Calvin must also turn to the social, political, cultural, and societal contexts. Most scholars know that Calvin married Idelette de Bure in August 1540 while living in Strasbourg. That historical fact remains a dead piece of information without knowing something about the relationship of men and women, the social customs, and the everyday character of life in Strasbourg. Likewise, we know that Calvin wrote to Bullinger asking him to enlist his help in a plan to address some of the political issues that were occurring in the Holy Roman Empire. But without some basic information

about the political world of the time, one cannot know whether Calvin was making a serious plan or simply passing on news.

A second answer to the question of why not delve deeply into Calvin's thought at each locus is that *Calvin in Context* is not a one-volume guide to Calvin's thought. Handbooks to Calvin's thought exist, and are useful. Herman Selderhuis's *The Calvin Handbook* is enormously helpful on a variety of topics.² *John Calvin in Context*, however, puts a variety of other studies into their proper historical, political, and theological contexts.

Therefore, instead of a chapter on Calvin's doctrine of predestination, there is a chapter on predestination in the medieval and early modern theological world. Instead of a chapter on Calvin's religious influences as he grew up, there is a chapter on French Christianity in the early sixteenth century. Instead of a chapter on Calvin's literary output, there is a chapter on the printed word in the early modern world.

John Calvin in Context begins with a biography of Calvin for those students who are novices in Calvin studies. From there, it offers a series of chapters on France, the University of Paris, French humanism, French religious politics, and the French Wars of Religion. In beginning there, we accept what some Genevans considered a fault – Calvin was French and never really put that behind him. From that point, the volume crosses into Switzerland, and the cities in which Calvin ministered. Geneva and Strasbourg are noted, as are Swiss politics, and the structures of social, cultural, and ecclesiastical life in Geneva. After covering this urban context, the volume takes a moment to rise above the smaller concerns to look at the empire and the ways that the upheavals of the early modern period were transforming Europe. One recent study has looked at the way that the religious, military, and cultural changes in the early modern period caused one of the first great refugee crises – and both Geneva and Calvin cannot be understood without that knowledge.³ The Jewish question was also an ongoing theme. Were Jews the people of Jesus Christ or a sly bunch who should be banished from the empire? Martin Luther made both arguments in his career – and it was Jews who supplied both the skills to examine the Old Testament in its original language, as well as the religious “other,” against which Christianity would be measured by so many theologians. Finally, another set of voices too often unheard by modern analysts were those of the women of the early modern period. Calvin had much to say to

² Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *The Calvin Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

³ Nicholas Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World: An Alternative History of the Reformation* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2015).

women, and some things to say about women. But all his work must be seen against the backdrop of the multivalent influences of the reforms and counterreforms occurring in the sixteenth century. The era of the Reformations changed women's lives – sometimes positively, and sometimes not. Understanding that context is crucial to grasping Calvin not only from the impression and vantage point of his close circle of friends (with the exception of his wife, all of whom were male) but from the broader perspectives of those women who also lived through those times.

The volume then turns to piety, theology, and ecclesiastical controversy with a section titled “The Religious Question.” It is a mark of how much historical context exists to understand Calvin properly that almost half the volume is set before we turn to religion. It was religion that drove the various movements – whether supporters or foes of Calvin's, people were motivated by their religious beliefs at a depth that is frequently shocking to modern readers. Beginning with the ideal of Western religious reform that had a long history prior to the sixteenth century, the volume plunges into the Luther Affair – the spark that lighted an array of differing fuses to metaphorical bombs that rocked the early modern European religious world. Soon, the religious questions raised efforts not merely to chide one's opponents, but instead as a search for truth, so colloquies were called to attempt to do so. Trent and the Augsburg Interim remind us that Catholicism continued to challenge the evangelical movement.

Three historical developments changed the character of the early modern period in basic ways for the religious world, and are the subject of the next three chapters. First, there is a chapter on biblical scholarship. The era of the Reformations was saturated with the Bible, both with editions and translations of it, and with scholarship seeking to understand and apply it.⁴ Likewise, the printed word came into its own with printing houses changing the economic, intellectual, and religious landscapes. Finally, a chapter takes up one of the rhetorical devices most commonly associated with the era of the Reformations – the polemic. Whether cleverly satirical or bluntly scatological, polemics were available to the reading and listening public at all times. Doctrinal loci also became the intellectual and religious battlefields of the early modern period. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, predestination, the

⁴ The term *Reformations* is intentional – there were a variety of different movements that did not all cohere. See Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2009); R. Ward Holder, *Crisis and Renewal: The Era of the Reformations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009); and Carlos Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

Trinity – all these are doctrines to which Calvin turned his considerable intellectual and spiritual powers – but all existed in an ecclesiastical and doctrinal world that preceded Calvin, and engaged thinkers in places as near as Bern, and as far away as Italy and Poland. Many Calvin students know his doctrinal positions on these matters, but are not fully versed in the intellectual and religious environment(s) in which Calvin worked.

“The Religious Question” ends with a series of chapters on issues that Calvin frankly deemed heretical. Chapters on the heresies of Servetus and Stancaró supply critical perspective for grasping some of the most famous polemics and events that revolved around issues of heretical belief. Other chapters consider idolatry, Trinitarian heresies, and Nicodemism and Libertinism. In each case, Calvin was one of the most significant voices in the early modern world, but was not alone in considering these issues or issuing statements about them.

The penultimate section of the book, “Calvin’s Influences,” recognizes the many ways Calvin was stirred to write, teach, and preach. When Alexandre Ganoczy traced Calvin’s sources for the first edition of the *Institutes*, he concentrated most of his efforts on those influences Calvin would have acknowledged as complementing his own, such as Luther, Melancthon, and Zwingli.⁵ But Calvin was influenced by a far broader group of theologians than those with whom he could generally agree. Calvin’s first serious work of theology was entitled *Psychopannychia*, and was written because of what Calvin believed Radicals were teaching about the sleep of the soul. In much the same way, Catholic writers, as well as Lutherans, other Reformed, and Anglicans all aroused Calvin. This section provides a way for Calvin to be seen among the other voices of the early modern religious world, whether it was supporting or damning him. Though the section begins with Calvin, it does not end with him but stretches well into the seventeenth century, just as his ideas did not die in 1564 but caused debates for the next centuries.

The final section recognizes what good historians have always known, that our reception of historical figures filters through our own *mentalités*. In “Calvin’s Reception,” we examine how Calvin became both more and less than the sum of his doctrinal teachings during his own lifetime, and how that process did not stop with his being buried in an unmarked grave in Geneva. International Calvinism coursed out of Geneva and took over large

⁵ Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (trans.) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 133–182. The exception is Scholastic Theology, and Ganoczy argues that Calvin reduced scholasticism to two twelfth-century authors and used them for polemical purposes because he only learned them after reading Luther (see p. 177).

swaths of Europe, only to relinquish much of that territory in the coming centuries. Calvin had both his hagiographers and those who would demonize him, and some of their conclusions endure in “common” knowledge. Reformed churches sprang up in the Netherlands, the British Isles, and their colonial possessions, and each exported it to further lands, especially to Asia. Outlining of the spread of Reformed churches is significant, but no less so than the intellectual tradition of Calvinism, received from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. The volume concludes with a sense of the various portraits analysts have drawn of Calvin, and how that reflects his contexts, and our own.

Steinmetz’s *Calvin in Context* put forth the history of exegesis method, and argued persuasively that the understanding of biblical interpreters’ significance depended in part on knowing what they knew. Only then could their originality and synthetic ability be discerned. *John Calvin in Context* seeks that same goal, but with a broader canvas that looks to place Calvin in contexts beyond the intellectual. Through all these efforts, John Calvin’s contributions to the intellectual and religious heritage of Christianity becomes ever clearer. Seen in his contexts, Calvin appears as one who is a devotee of his own time, dedicated to his intellectual pursuits, but turned toward the needs of a church that he could not but help mold in a pattern that was both traditional and innovative. In some manners, Calvin was a man of the late medieval age, comfortable with patterns of thought that were passing away even as he lived. In others, his efforts linked him to doctrines that would define the next two centuries. But in all cases, viewing the worlds in which he lived and through which he was received gives modern readers the best possible understanding of John Calvin. Neither hero, saint, nor demon, Calvin lived an early modern evangelical life, one that we have received through the intervening traditions.