

Calvin and the Christian Tradition

John Calvin lived in a divided world when past certainties were crumbling. Calvin claimed that his thought was completely based upon scripture, but he was mistaken. At several points in his thought and his ministry, he set his own foundations upon tradition. His efforts to make sense of his culture and its religious life mirror issues that modern Western cultures face, and that have contributed to our present situation. In this book, R. Ward Holder offers new insights into Calvin's successes and failures and suggests pathways for understanding some of the problems of contemporary Western culture such as the deep divergence about living in tradition, the modern capacity to agree on the foundations of thought, and even the roots of our deep political polarization. He traces Calvin's own critical engagement with the tradition that had formed him and analyzes the inherent divisions in modern heritage that affect our ability to agree, not only religiously or politically, but also about truth. An epilogue comparing biblical interpretation with Constitutional interpretation is illustrative of contemporary issues and demonstrates how historical understanding can offer solutions to tensions in modern culture.

R. Ward Holder is a professor of theology at Saint Anselm College. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for this project, he has written, among other works, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation: Calvin's First Commentaries* (Brill, 2006) and edited *John Calvin in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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Scripture, Memory, and the Western Mind

R. WARD HOLDER

Saint Anselm College, New Hampshire



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*In memory of Robert M. Kingdon, David C. Steinmetz,
and Irena D. Backus
Scholars whose work reminds me
that I stand on the shoulders of giants*

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Finally, this book makes the argument that Calvin did not escape his own tradition because to do so was impossible. That reminds me that I stand in a rich tradition, most frequently on display at the Sixteenth Century Society and Conference annual meetings, but alive throughout the years in telephone calls, e-mails, Zoom meetings, Facebook posts, and chance encounters. Beyond all those already mentioned, I have been graced with the insights of Andrew Pettegree, Euan Cameron, Liz Lehfeldt, Jennifer Powell McNutt, Jon Balsarak, Barbara Pitkin, Esther Chung-Kim, Rady Roldan-Figueroa, Christine Kooi, Brad Gregory, Mirjam van Veen, Jesse Spohnholz, Sujin Pak, Amy Nelson Burnett, Hal Parker, Ron Rittgers, Sabine Hiebsch, Jonathan Reid, Kay Edwards, Nick Terpstra, Peter Opitz, Amy Leonard, Bruce Janacek, Arnold Huijgen, Bill Naphy, Michael Bruening, Carlos Eire, Jill Fehleison, Steve Burnett, Ute Lotz-Heumann, and Ken Woo. All of these are part of the scholar-friends that make the work of scholarship a joy, as well as a vocation.

A Note on Translations

In general, I have used translations that are widely available in English, so as to make the work of retracing my steps easier for other scholars. I have endeavored to be clear in the notes what translations I was using. In a very few cases, I have adjusted the translation to clarify the points being made.

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A Note on Language

Naming Christians who rejected the Church of Rome in the early modern period is not easy. “Protestant” was given to followers of Luther who protested at the Diet of Speyer in 1529, and was not a universal sixteenth-century term. Many, though definitely not all, used the term “evangelical,” in various languages, to deny other terms such as heretic, schismatic, or Lutheran. In this work, I have chosen the term “evangelical” as a term to describe the theological and ecclesiastical world in which Calvin lived. However, in the epilogue, because it deals with twenty-first-century America, “evangelical” is used to describe a specific modern Christian movement. Though the words are the same, the meaning is not. Finally, when necessary, I have generally referred to the reforming movement in which Calvin found himself as “Reformed,” rather than “Calvinist.” Many scholars have pointed out that the tradition was broader than Calvin, that it preceded him, and it still continues centuries after his death.

Abbreviations

- CO Calvin, Ioannis. *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*. 59 volumes. Edited by Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss. Brunswick: C.A. Schwetschke and Son, 1895. Cited by volume and column number.
- ICR Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 volumes. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960. Cited by book, chapter, and paragraph number.
- OS Calvin, Ioannis. *Opera Selecta*. 5 volumes. 3rd ed. Edited by Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel. Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1967. Cited by volume and page number.

