

*Calvin* by Bruce Gordon, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009

John Calvin was an extremely complex man, and one that history has not always remembered kindly – or accurately, either. Despite that, he has actually been rather well served by his biographers, at least recently. In the last twenty years we have seen fine and enduring biographies of Calvin by Bouwsma, McGrath and Parker, simply to list the most prominent ones in English. Bruce Gordon's contribution thus enters a very competitive field. From the outset, it ought to be considered as not only contributing magnificently to the field but as setting some very high standards within it, especially as a well rounded detailed account of Calvin and his times.

Both Bouwsma's and McGrath's biographies succeed largely as *explanations* of Calvin. Bouwsma, for example, without being reductionistic about it, for example, tries to show how Calvin psychologically oscillated between deep anxiety in a time of change and a confident (perhaps overconfident) rationalism that made him look more like the hated Scholastics. McGrath excels at laying out Calvin's theological context in order to place him. Gordon, however, may be the most successful of all of them as a comprehensive, even handed historical presentation of all of John Calvin. Gordon certainly admires Calvin for his positive and untiring efforts to establish a thoroughly reformed church, as one who cared deeply for the fate of Protestants in his native but distant France, and for his constant balancing act of trying to bring the various elements of the Reformed churches of Switzerland together while at the same time trying to find common ground with the German Lutherans, even as Zwingli's followers in Zurich made the Lutherans very nervous, indeed. But Gordon, perhaps far more clearly than others, also allows the least attractive aspects of Calvin to stand out as well. Calvin was frequently abused by his enemies; however, he was often unrelenting in his attacks on those whom he felt had betrayed him, or simply misunderstood him. This two sidedness of the man haunted him regularly. For example, on the one hand, he owed a great deal to the support early on of Queen Marguerite of Navarre for the Reformed cause; on the other hand, he probably killed the prospects of Reformed Christianity in England when his and Geneva's connection to John Knox's attack on female sovereigns so outraged Elizabeth I.

Gordon has thus given us a Reformer as reformers probably always are – a man with some very clear and important ideas zealous to push the Reformation, and to purify the church because he thought the church was that important, but also a man who was frequently very hard on others, but perhaps no more so than on himself. Thus this book stands out as one of the fullest accounts of Calvin's life and times, and one that is to be praised for its sense of the man as whole.

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