

Calvin at 500: A reformer's legacy

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

You may find members of Presbyterian and Reformed churches more theologically engaged than usual these days. This year marks the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth. I decided to observe the occasion by focusing my reading this summer on Calvin. I skimmed T. H. L. Parker's classic biography, which I had read years before. I read Bruce Gordon's new and exceptional biography, *Calvin*; William Stacy Johnson's *John Calvin: Reformer for the 21st Century*; the commemorative issue of *Theology Today*; and a surprisingly lucid *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*, by Christopher Elwood.

Calvin was first and foremost a humanist scholar, influenced by the early pre-Enlightenment thinking at the University of Paris. When his father had a falling out with church authorities in Noyon, Calvin transferred to Orleans to study law. His skills as a humanist and legal thinker made him a formidable writer and debater—some would say a kind of prosecuting attorney for the Reformed faith. He argued and fought with everybody, even his closest friends. He corresponded extensively with Philip Melancthon in Wittenberg, with the archbishop of Canterbury and with all the major leaders of the Reformation.

Gordon calls Calvin “the greatest reformer of the 16th century, brilliant, visionary and iconic. The superior force of his mind was evident in all he did. He was also ruthless, and an outstanding hater. . . . He never felt he had encountered his intellectual equal and he was probably correct. To achieve what he believed to be right, he would do virtually anything.”

Calvin is frequently associated with the doctrine of predestination. It was not his invention. St. Paul apparently believed it and so did Augustine and Luther. Calvin's ruthless scholarship drove the doctrine to its logical, if appalling, conclusion—God foreordains who will be saved and who will be damned. Mainline Presbyterians have softened the doctrine—but who doesn't ponder the mystery of how any of us came to be who we are and what we have become?

In spite of his acerbic arrogance and almost violent rhetoric when contending with opponents, Christian unity remained close to the heart of Calvin's thinking. He tried to find common ground with reformers in Wittenberg, Zurich and Canterbury. And he had a deep sense of the bonds of friendship and affection that hold a congregation of believers together.

The quincentenary year motivated me to pull *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* from my shelf and read a bit every day. It's tough going, but good for my mind and soul, like a morning run or swim. But my favorite Calvin text remains the hymn attributed to him, "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art," particularly the fourth stanza: "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness, / No harshness hast Thou and no bitterness. / O grant to us the grace we find in Thee, / That we may dwell in perfect unity."