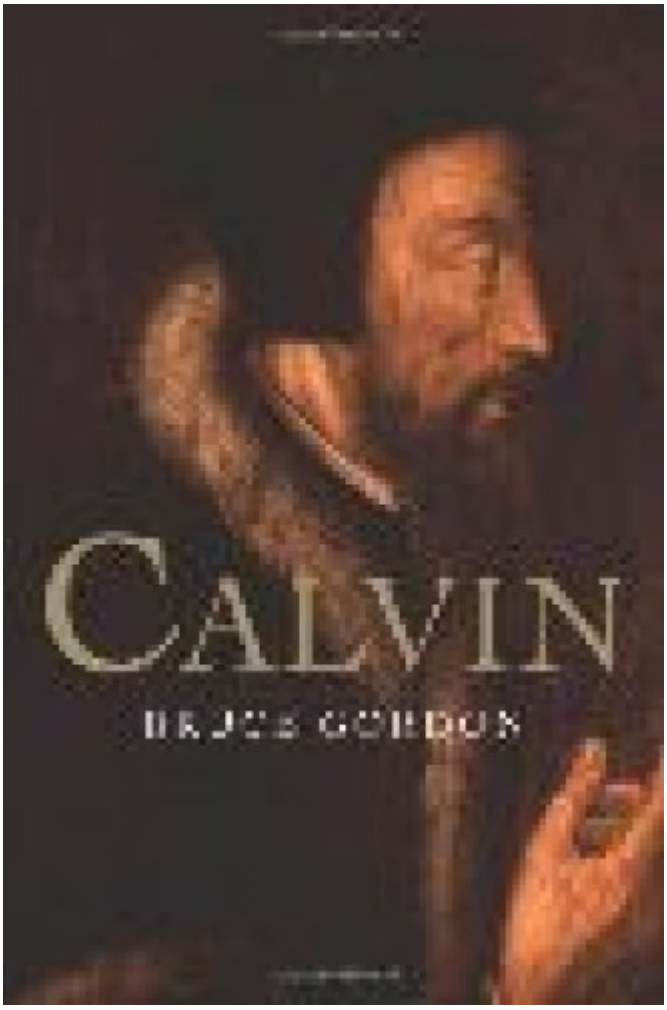
Calvin

reviewed by George Stroup in the April 20, 2010 issue

In Review



Calvin

Bruce Gordon
Yale University Press

John Calvin (1509–1564) continues to fascinate us. The year 2009 marked the 500th anniversary of his birth and witnessed a remarkable outpouring of books and articles

celebrating his pivotal role in the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the enduring significance of his theology (especially as articulated in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*), his commentaries and lectures on the Bible, and his sermons (his collected works comprise 59 volumes). He fascinates us because his influence is not limited to Reformed or even to Protestant theology and church life, but extends to many aspects of the contemporary world. Historians continue to debate his impact on Western culture—his role in the emergence of free-market capitalism, liberal democracy, the arts and education.

But Calvin continues to puzzle us as well. In his own day he was both admired and reviled. John Knox, the Scottish reformer, described Calvin's Geneva as "the most perfect school of Christ." On the other hand, soon after Calvin's death, Jérôme-Hermès Bolsec, a French refugee banished from Geneva in 1551 for arguing that Calvin's interpretation of predestination made God responsible for evil, wrote a biography that described him as sexually immoral, greedy, cruel and tyrannical. Who, then, was the real Calvin? Was he the mean-spirited, seemingly joyless figure we encounter in his portraits, the dictator of Geneva who tolerated no dissent and cruelly persecuted his opponents, most notably the Spanish physician Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake for his heretical views on the Trinity? Or was he the pious man who cared deeply about the thousands of refugees who poured into Geneva and yearned for unity among the Lutheran and Swiss churches, the brilliant theologian who created "the most perfect school of Christ"?

Bruce Gordon, professor of Refor mation history at Yale Divinity School, has written a magnificent biography that brings clarity to much of the confusion surrounding "the historical Calvin," dispelling many of the stereotypes that have followed him through the centuries, but without denying the complexity and ambiguity of Calvin's personality. Gor don describes Calvin sympathetically and appreciatively as "the greatest Protestant reformer of the sixteenth century, brilliant, visionary, and iconic," while at the same time acknowledging that he demanded loyalty from those around him and, if he felt slighted or betrayed, could be petty and vindictive. He was a "ruthless and an outstanding hater" who "intimidated, bullied, and humiliated, saving some of his worst conduct for his friends." He was indeed a puzzle, or, as Gordon puts it, "a difficult circle to square"—a "supremely talented and confident voice of the church" on the one hand; on the other, a "haunted, often bedevilled, individual."

The man Gordon discovers in Calvin's extensive correspondence was "serious, though not without a sense of humor, intense and deeply spiritual." He possessed a remarkable memory, a strong sense of personal discipline and a prodigious work ethic. He began the day at four in the morning with prayer and prayed again at meals and before going to bed. He struggled with multiple health problems, including migraines, stomach and bowel disorders and kidney stones; during his last days he had to be carried on a litter to preach and lecture.

Gordon, who specializes in the Swiss Reformation, is particularly helpful in explaining the religious, social and political context of 16th-century Geneva, the complicated relationships between Geneva and the other Swiss cities (especially Bern and Zurich), and the political problems Geneva faced with France and the Holy Roman Empire. Repeatedly Calvin tried, without success, to find common ground between Lutherans in Germany and Huldrych Zwingli's followers in Zurich, especially on the difficult question of Christ's presence at the Lord's Supper. He followed closely the plight of persecuted Protestant churches in France, and with the other ministers in the consistory he worked to prepare ministers for those congregations.

By focusing on Calvin's correspondence, Gordon illumines his relationship to figures such as Theodore Beza; Gui llaume Farel and Pierre Viret, Calvin's colleagues in the initial reform of Geneva; Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, who gave Calvin shelter when he was briefly banished from Geneva and who became his mentor and something of a father figure; Philip Melanchthon, Luther's successor in Witten berg, who deeply influenced Cal vin's theology; and Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich. In his letters Calvin gives us a glimpse of both his admirable and deplorable traits in a manner in which he seldom does elsewhere.

Gordon describes not only Calvin's many duties as a minister but also his involvement with the various civic councils and political leaders of Geneva on important matters such as the administration of a hospital by church deacons, the creation of an academy and the care of religious refugees. Throughout all of this, Calvin was a controversial figure, a French refugee who was opposed by some of the most powerful, prominent figures in Geneva. Only in the elections of 1555, nine years before he died, did Calvin finally triumph over his political opponents.

By no means does Gordon ignore Calvin's theological views, especially his understanding of providence, the journey of the Christian life and the nature of the church and its sacraments, but Calvin's theology is not his primary focus. He gives

several pages to Calvin's first biblical commentary on Romans, published in 1540. Here he discusses Calvin's understanding of God, predestination, the relation between exegesis and theology, and the relation between Gospel and law. Calvin makes use of Renaissance principles of decorum and dissimilation to "accommodate Paul to the world of the sixteenth century." While Calvin did not deify the apostle Paul, Paul was his teacher and mentor.

Although Calvin's commentary on Romans is important for understanding his theology, it is no substitute for his *Institutes*, which he first published in 1536 and continued to revise during his final stay in Geneva (1541–1564). Gordon gives some attention to the development of Calvin's theology in the successive editions of the *Institutes*, but surprisingly he limits his discussion of the final edition of 1559 to a mere three pages. It is also striking how little attention Gordon gives to the role of the Holy Spirit in the *Institutes* and in the whole of Calvin's theology. The third book of the *Institutes*, he argues, is about faith, "which reveals God's will toward humanity and the benefits of Christ's sacrifice." However, it is the Spirit, not faith, that does this revealing for Calvin. The third book of the *Institutes* is primarily about the Holy Spirit, who binds sinners to Christ and enables them to receive Christ's benefits, the first of which is faith. Perhaps Gordon's neglect of the Spirit explains why he offers no sustained discussion of the important theme of union with Christ in Calvin's theology.

Gordon's impressive contribution to Calvin scholarship is to remind us that Calvin cannot be reduced to his theology and that his theology cannot be properly understood apart from the life he lived. He liberates Calvin from the many stereotypes to which he has too long been captive and turns him into a flesh-and-blood human being who is both more fascinating and more complex than his dour portraits suggest.