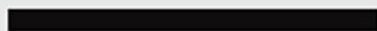


Calvin – Saint or Sinner?

Edited by
HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS

*Spätmittelalter, Humanismus,
Reformation*



Mohr Siebeck

Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation

Studies in the Late Middle Ages,
Humanism and the Reformation

herausgegeben von Berndt Hamm (Erlangen)

in Verbindung mit

Amy Nelson Burnett (Lincoln, NE), Johannes Helmroth (Berlin)

Volker Leppin (Jena), Heinz Schilling (Berlin)

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Calvin: Saint or Sinner?

HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS

As a start of the Calvin year 2009, a large number of experts in Calvin studies and Reformation research in general convened from October 31 – November 2nd at the Vanenburg Castle at Putten (The Netherlands). The conference, organised by the Institute for Reformation Research (Theological University Apeldoorn), dealt with the fact that for a long time Calvin has been seen as a great reformer, theologian, preacher and exegete by some, while others could only see him as a rigid dogmatist, the intolerant leader of the city of Geneva, and the one who burdened the reformed tradition with a joyless lifestyle. With the 500th birthday of John Calvin lying ahead, scholars presented papers on various topics in order to get a better and more objective perspective on John Calvin. These papers have in this volume been organised into four sections: biography, Bible, theology and church.

Biography

The image of Calvin as a saint or a sinner has for centuries been based on a few old biographies rather than on research into available facts. However, as Irena Backus demonstrates, the various editions of Theodore Beza's Life of Calvin get less hagiographical, although his life remains heroic. Far from that is the contribution of Max Engammare, in which he measures Calvin with the norm of the so-called seven capital sins of the Roman Catholic tradition. He concludes that pride was the reformer's major sin in this list, but admits that Calvin himself was aware of this. Isabelle Graesslé then challenges the negative ideas that up until today exist of Calvin and pleads for a long overdue rehabilitation, for which there is ample reason. A case study for this new approach is the article of Frans van Stam, in which he describes the plausible motives for printers, and for Calvin as an author to publish a work under a false name.

Olivier Millet describes Calvin as a man suffering from many physical problems and from an overload of work, relating it to Calvin's conviction that God called him to His service, a service of self-sacrifice. This attitude may have made him a hero, certainly not a saint.

Bible

How Calvin saw himself in the light of being called to be a prophet of God is the theme of Jon Balsarak. The parallels Calvin drew between the situation of the Old Testament church and the church in Geneva did increase the reformers's awareness that he had the position of a prophet and should speak and act accordingly. This however did not mean that he saw himself as an author of Scripture. According to John Thompson, Calvin wanted to listen to the tradition of the Church, but from the conviction that much of earlier exegesis did not do justice to what God had said. Thompson however also states that Calvin was a reformer of exegesis, yet stayed much closer to traditional exegesis than is often thought. Proof of this is Christoph Burger's comparison between Luther's and Calvin's explanation of the Magnificat. Calvin is more concise and more exact in his exegesis of Mary's words, but he also takes up thoughts that can be found in some medieval exegetes.

Theology

There is no doubt that Calvin was a reformer of theology, and the contributions in this volume demonstrate this. Arnold Huygen for example deals with the concept of 'accommodation' as Calvin's instrument to deal with the way in which the transcendent God reveals himself to humans and what this means for our knowledge of God. As a reformer of theology, Calvin too had to deal with existing views and positions. Calvin's attitude towards medieval theology differs from that of Luther and Zwingli, in the sense that he feels less necessity to defend himself against this tradition and therefore also is more open to its reception. Volker Leppin compares the structure of Calvin's theology and his conception of philosophy, and finds basic parallels between Calvin and medieval thinkers. In his anthropology, Calvin makes use of the results of the Luther-Erasmus debate, but also of insights of Augustine and Melancthon, as Tony Lane shows. Christian Link deals with the fascinating and complex issue of predestination and admits that Calvin – just as Augustine and Luther – had to deal with the complicated and seemingly inconsistent 'data' given by biblical authors such as John and Paul. Günter Frank too deals with the reception of existing concepts, especially with that of the natural knowledge of God. Frank states that in reading Calvin it should be noted that he speaks as a theologian, not as a philosopher. More related to present day theology is the paper of Kees van der Kooi. Calvin's christology is in balance between a theology of the cross and a theology of resurrection, which makes his theology even more relevant for today.

Church

The final section of this volume deals with the papers that were related to Calvin's position in the church. Although Calvin can be seen as the *primus inter pares* regarding those who contributed to the contents and function of the reformed confessions, he certainly is not the only one, as Emidio Campi claims. Campi suggests that more research should be devoted to those reformers who so long stood in the shadow of the major figures, but also that the reformed tradition should be seen more as a whole. Karin Maag questions the idea of Calvin as being the ideal teacher. Tracing Calvin's career and the content of his lectures, she concludes that he was not exceptional as a teacher but highly influential. Fitting with the image of Calvin as a sinner is the image of the terror of Genevan discipline. Scott Manetsch analyses this image on the basis of careful studies of the remaining records and claims that it was not a matter of terror but of pastoral care that characterizes the cases in which men and women were disciplined. This approach is in line with Calvin's spirituality, as Elsie McKee describes this. Calvin strove for himself and for others to live a life of 'pietas', not as a condition for grace but as a result of it. McKee calls Calvin's spirituality creative in the way he combined elements from the Bible and traditional elements. In this spirituality, the knowledge of guilt before God and the necessity of a sanctified life are basic. Calvin knew both, being 'simul' saint and sinner.

Conclusion

The great variety of topics as well as the rich contents of the contributions demonstrate that Calvin research is closer to the beginning than to the end. The Calvin year 2009, which started with the conference at the Vanenburg, has given an immense impulse to this research, and this volume gives insights and directions from which many will profit.

This conclusion also gives me the opportunity to thank those who have made this book possible. My assistant Martijn de Groot has done a great job in formatting the manuscript. I would like to thank Frau Ilse König (Mohr Siebeck) for her patience and friendly co-operation. The editors of the series "Spätmittelalter und Reformation" deserve thanks for taking this volume in their respected 'Reihe'. I would also like to give special thanks to Mr. Jan Baan for his generous contribution to the conference, and to the people at the Vanenburg for making us feel at home there.

Biography

The Beza/Colladon *Lives* of Calvin and the Calvinist concept of sainthood¹

IRENA BACKUS

For mediaeval Christians, especially from the thirteenth century onwards, the saints were the dead who had received special recognition and who had entered the kingdom of God. Unlike the reformers who considered all believers dead or alive as saints without paying them any particular homage, except as members of the true church, the medieval church honoured particularly a limited number of the deceased to whom it accorded the title of saint. In order to merit the title the deceased had to satisfy a certain number of conditions, the most important of which was the celebration of the day of the saint's death which was co-terminous with his or her entry into the kingdom of heaven, for example the feast of Saint John, the feast of Saint Catherine etc. Although frequently in the later Middle Ages, recognition of a saint by the church was due to popular pressure, no one, as a rule, could become a saint without official ecclesiastical recognition, or canonisation, which could be granted either by the bishop or by the pope. The latter practice was to become dominant in the West from the thirteenth century onwards, which did not stop a certain number of local cults of the saints. At the same time, the Eastern Church continued to canonise its saints by episcopal authority. This meant a proliferation of lists of saints and of calendars. All the saints, local, national or canonised by Rome continued to be venerated for a hundreds of years after their death, as is the case to this day. The most common form of hagiography was their *Lives*, which commemorated their merits. These *Lives* could be divided into two closely related subgenres: straightforward biographical accounts containing a legendary element and sermons which also included legendary material. The purpose of these writings was to depict the saints as models of how Christians should live and not to give a historical account of their origins, social context or personalities. Thus Gregory of Tours entitled his

¹ Some of the material in this essay is derived from Irena Backus, *Life Writing in Reformation Europe. Lives of reformers by friends, disciples and foes*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. (Cf. indications in the footnotes). Most of it, however, is new. The introduction and the comparison with Jacques Lect's *Life* of Chandieu are also new and based on original research.

collection of *Lives* of twenty three Gallic saints *De vita patrum* or *Life of the fathers* in the singular, because he wanted to stress the merits and virtues which made up the one ideal of sainthood. Differences of the number and quality of miracles, or the different types of abnegation practised by each were not important. Given this underlying aim and scope it is inevitable that *Lives* of the saints should obey very strict rules of composition and that the saints should be depicted as followers and imitators of Christ *par excellence*. Certain motifs and certain expressions became their hallmarks and were generally applicable regardless of the particular saint's origins, gender or identity.²

However, this model could not fit the 16th century *Lives* of the major reformers. When confronted by the latter therefore, we cannot help but ask ourselves: "what sort of document is it?" Are we dealing with another form of hagiography or are we dealing with the writing of history? Or a bit of both? All sorts of subsidiary questions arise. Are we dealing with a private commemoration of a teacher or a friend destined for a limited public? Or are we faced with a funeral encomium intending to highlight the merits and achievements of the deceased on the model of Greek and Roman *Lives*? It could also be that are we confronted by an attack on or a defence of the dead reformer's character and undertaking. Finally a *Life* could also be another way of writing a History of the Reformation or for that matter a way of presenting a school manual of theology or ethics. Or, it could be a mixture of any or these types of writing. To put it briefly, a 16th century biographies of reformers do not form a clearly defined genre in contrast with medieval *Lives* of the saints. Moreover, they are marked by tensions between history, invective, hagiography and the funeral *laudatio* style. Today I shall talk about the early *Lives* of Calvin by Beza and Colladon concentrating on the way they juggle with the notion of sainthood, not wishing either to scrap it altogether or to imitate medieval *Lives* of the saints. The second question I shall be attempting to answer will concern itself with Jacques Lect's³ *Life* of Antoine de la Roche Chandieu (ca.

² The literature on mediaeval *Lives* of the saints is very abundant but there is no adequate general work in English. By way of a general introduction see René Aigrain, *Hagiographie, ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 2000). Reprint of the original 1953 edition with new bibliography by Robert Godding. See also Jacques Dubois and Jean-Loup Lemaître, *Sources et méthodes de l'hagiographie médiévale* (Paris: Cerf, 1993).

³ Jacques Lect (1556–1611) studied law at Bourges and Geneva prior to becoming professor of law at the Academy of Geneva in 1583. He was a member of the small Council from 1584 onwards and a syndic in 1597, 1601, 1605, 1609. He followed the political and religious line of Calvin and Beza to whom he was much devoted. He was involved in the negotiations leading up to the Peace of St. Julien of 1603, a treaty which affirmed Geneva's independence from Savoy defeated in the Escalade of december 1602. He wrote a number of political and

1534–1591) in an attempt to discover whether the model of the Beza/Colladon *Lives* of Calvin was functional when it came to the writing of *Lives* of other reformers.

Calvin

Calvin's disciple – biographers faced various issues. The chief of these was the defence of his reputation in the face of rumours about his purportedly dissolute private life, his dictatorial ways and his intolerance. There were also some suspicions of Genevan preachers instituting a Calvin cult. On the reformer's death in 1564 a need for a detailed account of his life made itself felt in order to show that Calvin was a holy individual after all. This need was probably increased by Calvin's well-known reluctance to talk about himself. However, unlike the followers of Luther, the Genevans did not have the option of preaching on Calvin on the model of *Lives* of the saints, nor could they compare him to John the Baptist or similar biblical prophet without committing what was in their view the unpardonable crime of confusing divine and human elements of religious belief and practice. The question that preoccupied mainly Beza but also Antoine de la Faye and Nicolas Colladon after Calvin's death was how to write a *Life* of the reformer that would correct historical errors and rumours, and portray Calvin as the saintly individual *sine macula et ruga*, while at the same time avoiding giving the impression of writing a *Life* of a saint, something did not worry the Lutherans at all. In other words, the problem of Calvin's successors could be summed up as: how to write the *Life* of a protestant saint without making him look like a saint of the Catholic Church?

The problem was not an easy one, which is why Beza with the encouragement of de la Faye and with the help of Colladon had three successive attempts at writing the *Life* of Calvin, which saw the light of day successively in 1564, 1565 and 1575.

As is well-known, Beza wrote the first version of his *Life* of Calvin in French as a preface to Calvin's Commentary on Joshua which the reformer left unpublished on his death in 1564 and which his successor had published by Perrin in Geneva in the same year.⁴ Still in 1564 Beza published

legal treatises and is best known for his *Le citoyen de Genève* (co-authored with Jean Sarasin), 1606, a work of anti-savoyard propaganda. See M. Campagnolo, art. 'Jacques Lect' in *Dictionnaire historique suisse* [<http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/f/F116284.php>] consulted on 25.08.2008. His English connections and his biography of Chandieu have never yet been studied.

⁴ See Frédéric Gardy, *Bibliographie des œuvres de Théodore de Bèze* (Geneva: Droz, 1960), no. 173, p. 105. Hereafter: Gardy.

the *Life* separately under the title *Discours de M. Théodore de Besze, contenant en bref l'histoire de la vie et mort de Maistre Iean Calvin avec le Testament et derniere volonté dudict Calvin. Et le catalogue des liures par luy composez. 1564.*⁵ Gardy lists four separate imprints of the leaflet all dating from 1564. All of these were printed without the printer's name. However, Gardy identifies one as emanating from the presses of Thomas Bouchard in Saint Lô⁶ and another as being the work of Eloi Gibier of Orléans.⁷ Of the other two, one bears the place of printing as being Orléans; the other neither the printer's name nor his address. All four imprints contain the printer's preface to the reader but only the Saint Lô imprint also includes the preface by Antoine de la Faye.⁸

This short document points up the problem very clearly and succinctly. In contrast with the *Life* of Luther, writing the *Life* of Calvin turned out to be an embarrassing business. De la Faye's preface is correspondingly defensive. He argues that remarkable, pious individuals are intended by God as a proof of His grace and that their human merits count for nothing. "Therefore, he notes, the praiseworthy lives of those who were gifted with virtues are left to us as a memorial not so that we obscure the grace that God made shine through them and exalt these men unnecessarily, but so that God's grace is made known to us all and that we praise God for it." In contrast with all the Luther biographers, neither Beza nor de la Faye wishes to present Calvin as a mere instrument of providence. What Beza intends with his first *Life* of Calvin is to show that the human Calvin with *his individual* virtues is a proof of the workings of divine grace. However, as the printer's preface suggests, the first *Life* is merely an attempt at capturing the unique combination of Calvin as holy individual and Calvin as the proof of God's grace. The printer emphasises that Beza's *Life* is too short having been intended only as a preface and the reader must not think that the remembrance of someone as important as the Genevan reformer

⁵ I shall be referring to the 1564 printing without the printer's address. Hereafter: Beza, *Discours*. See Gardy, no. 175, p. 105.

⁶ See Gardy, no. 176, p. 106 (contains preface by Antoine de la Faye as well as the printer's address to the reader). Cf. Geneva: Musée historique de la Réformation copy (shelf-mark: B 24, 1 (64) b. De la Faye's preface figures on fol. A ij r.–Aij v.: *inc.* 'Quand Dieu nous propose quelques excellens personnages...' *des.* '...qui est la parole de Dieu.' De la Faye distinguishes the *Life* of Calvin from the Catholic hagiographical genre and stresses that *Lives* of saintly individuals are intended by God not to obscure His glory but to highlight it. By imitating the example of Calvin and other saintly men we get to obey God's commandments.

⁷ See Gardy, no. 174, p. 105.

⁸ See Gardy, no. 175, p. 105; no. 177, p. 107.

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