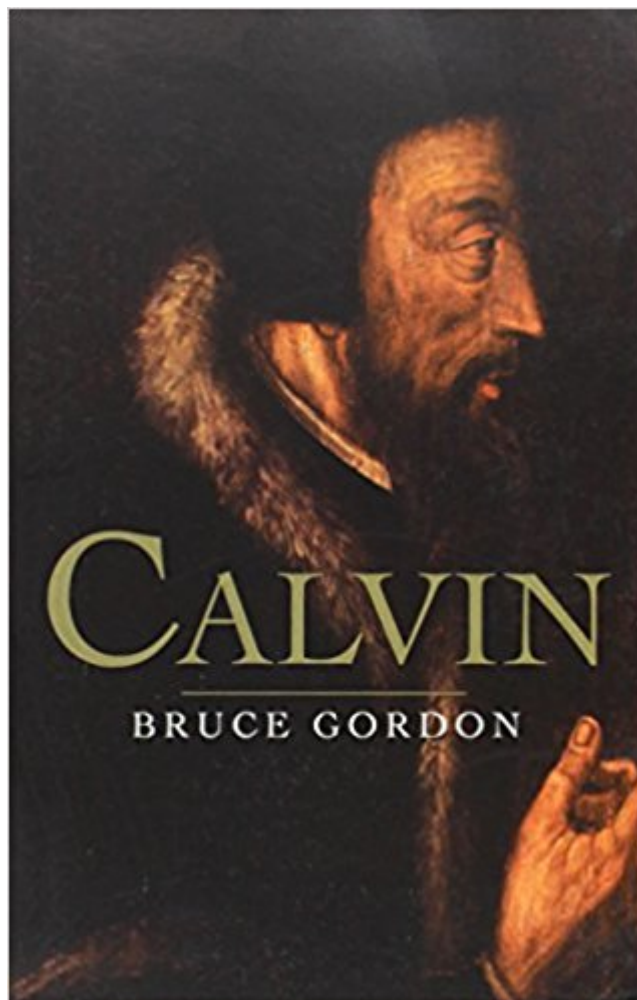


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# Calvin



## Synopsis

During the glory days of the French Renaissance, young John Calvin (1509-1564) experienced a profound conversion to the faith of the Reformation. For the rest of his days he lived out the implications of that transformation—*as* exile, inspired reformer, and ultimately the dominant figure of the Protestant Reformation. Calvin's vision of the Christian religion has inspired many volumes of analysis, but this engaging biography examines a remarkable life. Bruce Gordon presents Calvin as a human being, a man at once brilliant, arrogant, charismatic, unforgiving, generous, and shrewd. The book explores with particular insight Calvin's self-conscious view of himself as prophet and apostle for his age and his struggle to tame a sense of his own superiority, perceived by others as arrogance. Gordon looks at Calvin's character, his maturing vision of God and humanity, his personal tragedies and failures, his extensive relationships with others, and the context within which he wrote and taught. What emerges is a man who devoted himself to the Church, inspiring and transforming the lives of others, especially those who suffered persecution for their religious beliefs.

## Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press; Reprint edition (May 31, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 030017084X

ISBN-13: 978-0300170849

Product Dimensions: 1.2 x 5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 27 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #404,341 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #189 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Calvinist #2494 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Religious #15833 in Books > History > World

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prophet and an apostle whose genius lay in his ability to interpret the Bible and express a coherent, penetrating and lucid vision of God's abiding love." — Henry Carrigan, Publishers Weekly

"In this 500th year of Calvin's birth, Gordon . . . has produced a scholarly yet accessible study that is not hagiography but an honest assessment of a man who had great talent and great faith and also great flaws. While writing from a Reformed perspective, Gordon offers a balanced view." — Augustine J. Curley, Library Journal "A magnificent biography . . . [Bruce Gordon] liberates Calvin from the many stereotypes to which he has too long been captive and turns him into a flesh-and-blood human being." — George Stroup, Christian Century "Bruce Gordon is an authority on the Swiss reformation, and his portrayal of Calvin in the broader context of European politics is unsurpassed. . . . [An] excellent book." — Barton Swaim, The Weekly Standard "[A] new and exceptional biography." — John M. Buchanan, Christian Century Magazine "The year 2009 marked the quincentenary of Calvin's birth. Among the many admirable books published to mark the occasion, Bruce Gordon's Calvin stands out. . . . Gordon's Calvin will deservedly stand as the standard introduction to Calvin's life for a very long time." — Thomas J. Davis, Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture "Professor Gordon has surpassed our highest expectations. Gordon's Calvin will rightly become the standard biography. . . . This work deserves the widest possible audience . . . beautifully written . . . reliable and enjoyable." — David A. Booth, Ordained Servant "Gordon's Calvin will deservedly stand as the standard introduction to Calvin's life for a very long time." — Thomas J. Davis, Journal of Church History "Among recently published biographies of John Calvin, Bruce Gordon's Calvin is undoubtedly the most comprehensive and detailed in its telling of the story of Calvin's life as a sixteenth-century reformer and churchman. . . . No English biography of Calvin does more than Gordon's with Calvin's times and context." — Cornelis P. Venema, Mid-America Journal of Theology "Besides value for serious scholars, Gordon provides abundant insight into Calvin's personality . . . thanks to his reliance on the wealth of Calvin's letters about himself. . . . Humanizing Calvin and setting him in historical context, Gordon turns in a solid biography." — ALA Booklist "It is here at last . . . a great biography of Calvin . . . the best biography of John Calvin to date." — Christianity.com "Of all the books published in this anniversary year, the one that stands head-and-shoulders above the rest is Bruce Gordon's Calvin. . . . a well written biography, rich in primary and secondary source material which actually penetrates to the man himself. This is a high achievement. . . . informative, accessible, and realistic, it is the book to give to interested church members." — Sean Lucas, Reformation 21 "This engaging paperback should be required

reading for any student of the Protestant Reformation." — Renaissance Magazine

"Gordon's book is now the 'must have' source for a fair and accurate account of Calvin as a human being." — Donald K. McKim, Interpretation "A very stimulating book — extensive, detailed, in many respects brilliant." — Euan Cameron, Union Theological Seminary "Perhaps better than any previous study, Gordon's book replaces the iconic image of an impassive Calvin with the impassioned man of flesh and blood, reconstructing a fraught life lived between 'divine calling and human frailty'. In this quincentenary of the reformer's birth, scholars and general readers will be indebted to Gordon for having made Calvin comprehensible without compromising his complexity." — Brad Gregory, University of Notre Dame, author of *Salvation at Stake* "At last, a balanced biography of Calvin: Bruce Gordon's unblinking and unblinkered book brings a searching light to bear on one of the most private of the sixteenth century's most influential public figures." — Richard Rex "Bruce Gordon's lively new biography presents Calvin embedded in his surroundings, developing his ideas as events unfolded." — Merry Wiesner-Hanks, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Bruce Gordon is professor of Reformation history, Yale Divinity School. He is author and editor of a number of books, including *The Swiss Reformation*.

**Book Review** Gordon, Bruce. Calvin. New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 2009. There is one figure from the reformation that above all intrigues me. His small frame, brilliant intellect, fiery temper, divinely empowered work ethic and zeal for the glory of God in Christ compel me to get to know this man. I was introduced to John Calvin not long after my conversion as my father directed me towards the Heidelberg Catechism and the reformed faith. I found myself agreeing with the doctrines of grace as found in the documents of the Synod of Dordt and ever since have always thought of Calvin as a rich resource. Bruce Gordon's biography of Calvin came highly recommended by Tim Challies and since its release in 2009 I have vowed to read it. What I found in the book was not so much a window into Calvin's theology but a door into what shaped the man and the historical context he found himself in. Although it wasn't what I initially hoped for I think it was exactly what I needed. I have a much more informed understanding of the protestant struggles during the reformation and a different impression of the man Calvin. The biography never tried to make Calvin look better than he truly was. This quote proves that sufficiently: "There's no doubt he

struggled with Anger. However, one of his greatest strengths in his later career was an acute awareness that despite remarkable confidence in his calling and intellect he remained dangerously prone to moments of poor judgment on account of anger. There were clear informative gleanings and plenty of inspiration for faithful ministry in these pages. Some of the highlights for me were the importance of education, partnership, devotion, methodology, church government, unity, comforting the persecuted and suffering, common grace and dying well in the life and ministry of Calvin. Although it might seem strange to get into parenting right off the bat managing ones household is a qualification for being an overseer. Contrasting my upbringing with Calvin's confirms some of my convictions of about classical education, discipline and responsibility. It was said that the youth were treated as "smaller adults". I've seen the adverse in our culture where children are immersed in entertainment, have very little responsibility, and have horrendous issues with honoring or submitting to authority. Some of the habits I'm still trying to rid myself could be attributed to my upbringing. As a pastor, it is my responsibility to instill in parents of the church that parenting and taking this task seriously is not an option: "train their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord". Calvin was trained in grammar, logic, and rhetoric at a young age and no doubt set the foundation later ministry. Yes God can use any one of us but the lasting power of the Institutes, under God, was fruit of years of labor in Christian classical education. He worked hard at his university studies and there are still trustworthy men alive today who were on intimate terms with him at Orleans and who can testify that he often stayed up till midnight to study and ate hardly any supper in his eagerness for his work. Each morning when he woke, he would stay in bed for a few moments while he recalled to mind all that he had studied the previous day and mulled it over, so to speak. This is something I've thought much about. When I consider my athletic days of playing baseball I had one focus to be the best and I would do that at all costs. This means that I would be disciplined in what I ate, getting sleep, studying film, taking batting practice, and lift weights. I think Calvin had that same focus. Although my attention is divided with family, church, work and school, that central focus should remain the same, just on a different object: The glory of God. But at the same time I know there is much that I could do more of in terms of scripture memory, Greek studies, and prayer. Beza adds that Calvin's regime of study prepared him for his "profound scholarship in the study of Holy Scripture, and helped him to develop the remarkable powers of memory which were so evident in his later life". Calvin's rigorous legal training left its imprint on every aspect of his life. It sharpened his mind to interpret texts and

form precise arguments based on humanist methods; it provided him with a thorough grasp of subjects, ranging from marriage and property to crime. He was taught to frame legislation, write constitutions and offer legal opinions, all of which would loom large in his Genevan career. But the legacy was also intellectual. It was from the law that he would draw some of his most fundamental theological concepts, such as the Holy Spirit as *the witness*, the nature of *justification*, God as *legislator* and *judge*, and Christ as the *perpetual advocate*. This would all have a drastic effect on his commenting and sermons. I love to see God's hand of providence in the lives of his saints. I see similar things in my life of how God has used experiences in my past to shape my gifting and desires.

Conversion God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.

This was similar to my conversion. I was playing minor league baseball when I was converted and no longer had the same desire to spend long hours in the gym, and batting cage. My affections were most satisfied studying the Bible, reading theology, and serving in my church.

Calling Calvin was not looking to become a reformer or to head a church. He sought another place like Angoulême, where he could continue his studies and writing.

In short, while my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God so led me about through different turnings and changes that he never permitted me to rest in any place, until, in spite of my natural disposition, he brought me forth to public notice.

God had other plans Partnership/ Unity I was struck by the labor Calvin put in to bring Unity to the Swiss, German, and French protestant churches. He was never shy to travel far and wide to present confessions of faith, to debate, to handle conflicts. He wrote voraciously to solve this problem. If there could only be unity among the churches, Kings, queens and princes would be more apt to work together and see the protestant faith as more appealing and ease the persecution spread the printing of Bibles, books and tracts and the gospel would go forward. What the events of the 1540s clearly demonstrate is that Calvin never regarded his theological logical formulations as non-negotiable. No one who had seen the consequences of Charles' victory could allow disputes over terminology to doom the Church. Calvin was prepared to shift to reach agreement in the cause of unity.

Calvin would labor to train pastors and send to

France to start churches and work together for the spread of the gospel. **Methodology** The Pastors job is to persuade. The theologian, versed in the tools of rhetoric, interprets the Word and brings it into the public sphere. Those who hear are not just taught, but are moved to live the Christian life characterized by love and sacrifice. This was the rhetorical element of the Institutes. Calvin sought not only to teach, but also to persuade people of the truth. He rejected theology as a speculative science; it is an utterly practical art by which Christians are taught how to live. To do this required that they had to be persuaded to change. **Pastoral Ministry** He spoke of 'true and faithful' ministers as those who have a legitimate call, carry out their duties and preach the Word of God. Paul was the supreme example. A minister must live the Christian life he preaches, be prepared to suffer, to learn, to be admonished, not to dominate but to serve. The Ecclesiastical Ordinances set out what sort of person the minister should be: sound in doctrine and of holy life. Further, the Company of Pastors was to look for candidates 'fit to teach', possessing the ability to communicate. **Before the Face of God** Calvin believed that he lived each day in the presence of God and that every activity, great and small, was consecrated to the Lord, to whom he would have to give account.

**ÃfÂçÃ â Ñ** The Christian lives in the face of eternity. Everything that distracts from that reality must be shunned. **ÃfÂçÃ â Ñ** He arose at 4 am for prayer everyday. **Encouraging the Persecuted and Suffering** **ÃfÂçÃ â Ñ** Life in this world must be shaped by hope and patience; hope is grounded in the certain promises of God as expressed to all humanity in the Word, while patience is the ability to wait for God to reveal the hidden purpose. The pilgrimage is a struggle against the evils of the world, and suffering is the Christian's lot. Only those who love God more than the world will prevail. But prevail they will, because God will never abandon them while they travail in a hostile land. For Calvin, to go forward is to struggle, to bear the cross of Christ; the Christian life is not about standing still. 'Although believers are now pilgrims on earth,' he wrote on Romans 5:2, 'yet by their confidence they surmount the heavens, so that they cherish their future inheritance in their bosoms with tranquility.' **Common Grace** The fruits of the world, according to Calvin, are not simply for subsistence, but rather to be enjoyed: good wine, good food, conversation, friendship, and the pleasures of children and of marital relations. The Christian life is not just about suffering, though there was enough of that in the sixteenth century. The wonders of creation and the joys of life, when viewed through the lens of faith, sustain and nourish the pilgrim along the journey. **Dying Well** **ÃfÂçÃ â Ñ** "Even though Calvin was frail and soon to die, the work continued, largely thanks to his assistants, and he began his commentary on the book of Joshua. When he could go out, he was carried to church in a chair, and still preached and conducted baptisms. In the end, Calvin, Lying in bed, as he was happiest, in the company of friends whom he

enjoyed and needed, yet with their acknowledgement of his superiority to the extent of being afraid of him. To the end they were his disciples. That had always been Calvin's way. In his last testament 'But, alas, my desires and my zeal, if I may so describe it, have been so cold and flagging that I am conscious of imperfections in all that I am and do.' This brings a smile to my face and drives me, in humility, to labor for the Kingdom. "Preach the gospel, die and be forgotten."

By far the best look I've seen of his personal maturation from his early 20s till the end of his life. Fascinating to learn of the compromises he was eventually compelled, and wise, to make. Equally fascinating to see those he resolutely refused to make and the physical and emotional cost he paid consequently.

Anyone wanting to know about the man John Calvin, his times, the people he interacted with, and the major events of the era should read this wonderful book. But anyone wanting a book detailing his theology or changes in his theological beliefs over time will need to get another work. Of course this book discusses the important theological topics of the day and in Calvin's system, but Gordon keeps the details to a minimum. His focus is more on exposing the general reader to the bigger picture, esp. how Calvin interacted with Geneva the city and its leaders. And he brings out Calvin's brilliance as a thinker and his long-term impact on theology, the Reformation, and the Reformed Churches. This work is greatly improved as history due to Gordon's insistence that he stick to the record as it exists. So he doesn't try to pry into Calvin's mind or assess his psychological state over time. Where there are no or few records of times or events, Gordon sticks to what little is there. He is also fair at pointing out differing opinions. For example, as regards Calvin's "conversion", Gordon clearly shows how Calvin's two major discussions, 1539 & 1557, are wildly divergent. It also means the book moves very quickly in the early years. Calvin's conversion and his flight out of France, Dec. 1534, are done by p. 46. Gordon establishes that there are few records of his childhood, adolescence, and adult education. So he just reports what exists and doesn't attempt to fill in the blanks or flesh out missing years. Don't expect a lot of action. Calvin's life was spent mainly in France and Geneva. He did not travel extensively. Most of his interacting was done in letters or when people visited him. So the basic settings of this story: 25 years in France, flight, first time in Geneva, brief exile, brief time in Strasbourg, then back to Geneva for two decades. This is awarts and all book. It is not a one-sided book for or against Calvin. So we hear from his friends and his enemies. We learn about his medical problems. We learn about his wife and deceased child. We



see his ego as well as his friendships. Gordon points out where Calvin lied about something (usually to political leaders) or turned on his friends in anger. But he also shows his deep piety and his desire for godly Christian living. There are 12 nice illustrations, a great set of end notes, an excellent general Select Bibliography (that helps the reader find the best modern reference books on a subject), and a good Index. Thankfully there are 3 decent maps up front that show Europe, Swiss Confederation, and Geneva! So readers can readily refer to these throughout the text and get a sense for where things are taking place. My only major complaint is that Gordon doesn't do a good job explaining either the Swiss Confederation (how it was set up and how it worked politically and militarily) or its relation to the even more complex Holy Roman Empire and its complicated parts and leaders.

very thorough and comprehensive but it was perhaps so much so that it did not keep my interest. Perhaps my tolerance for theological debate is limited.

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