Theology of John Calvin: Th.M. Seminar
Instructor: Dr Derek Thomas
1ST818 [ 2 Credit Hours]

Spring Semester 2005

I Course Description

A seminar focusing on the writings of the sixteenth century Reformer, John Calvin

II Course Objectives

To familiarize students with the content and context of Calvin’s theological output
To identify key areas of theological interest both in the sixteenth century and our own
To discuss the implementation of Reformation pastoral ideas in the context of the church today

III Course Requirements

A. Reading Assignments

Primary:


Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God. Translated by J. K. S. Reid. Cambridge:

The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human
Choice against Pighius. Translated by G. I. Davies. Edited by A. N. S. Lane.

Secondary:


Helm, Paul John Calvin’s Ideas Oxford University Press, 2004

Additional Readings:

To be assigned relative to the paper topic chosen.

B. Paper
Write a 25 page paper (not including end-notes) on a topic to be agreed upon with the professor.

C. Class/Seminar Attendance

Attend and contribute to 2 seminar sessions:

Friday, September 30  2:50pm
Friday, November 25  2:50pm
This is the biography of the hour and a bad one at that. Bouwsma, known for his solid work on the Renaissance, does some psycho-analysis of Calvin, accusing him of being a schizophrenic with ambivalent goals and motives. T. H. L. Parker spills vitriolic angst over this book, suggesting that the book tells us far more about Bouwsma than it does about Calvin. If we adopt the principle: we know Calvin better than he knew himself, does this not spell the end of meaningful historiography? Parker gleefully anticipates the day when someone will write a similar book about Bouwsma, suggesting that he did not understand himself properly. Ah, the arrogance of the modern!

Reactions to the book:

“...this work is the most significant creative and helpful book I have read in the past thirty years of Calvin studies.” Philip Holtrop The Reformed Journal April 1989.


“...no Calvin scholar before him has uncovered so convincingly the personal fear and trembling in which Calvin wrote and lived. On the other hand, no effort is made to delineate the general anxiety of the times, both of the later Middle Ages and of the sixteenth century, so that we cannot know to what extent Calvin speaks from his own experience or to the condition of his times.” Heiko A. Oberman Times Literary Supplement August 19-25, 1988.

“Bouwsma’s book, taken as a whole...seems to this reviewer to be historical drama, beautifully constructed and highly informative, but lacking in certain central purposes and convictions of the main character.” Edward A. Dowey Journal of American Academy of Religion 57.4 Winter 1989.

“...to understand Calvin and his thought in human and historical terms, one must approach him through his spirituality, rather than through his theology.” William J Bouwsma, responding to some reviews of his own book in Pacific Theological Review 22/1 (Fall 1988.)

On the historiographical point of view that suggests we understand the sixteenth century better than Calvin did —

“On this basis an author can mean anything we want him to mean.” T. H. L. Parker, Calvin: An Introduction to his Thought (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 11.


Again, out of print, but on reserve in the library.

We will have some fun unraveling the sacramental theology of Calvin in this class. Do you have an opinion about the so-called “real presence” debate? Gerrish does as good a job as any on this issue in disentangling Calvin’s sometimes difficult and confusing prose, but before you adopt the view that Calvin was all shot to pieces at this point (William Cunningham and R L Dabney notwithstanding) you need to read this book. And maybe consult Dr Ligon Duncan for a contrary view!


This is now out of print, but will be on reserve in the library. The best biography of Calvin. Ok, Ok, so Parker is a
Barthian and he lets his “slip” show every now and then. True! But he is also unapologetic about the sixteenth century and doesn’t get hives whenever Michael Servetus’ name is mentioned.


This too, is out of print, but some wise technician has managed to cobble a “not so pretty” edition and a few of these are still available in the Book Store. An original is on reserve in the library.

Calvin was primarily a preacher. This course will concentrate on the Institutes, but it would be an error to think that this is the real focus of Calvin’s ministry. He preached on average 8 sermons every two weeks (5 one week and three the next). Parker’s analysis of this preaching is wonderful reading and immensely encouraging and challenging at the same time. But watch out for those Barthianisms on what constitutes the moment of “divine encounter” when the Word comes home to the listener!


So, you thought theology was easy! And then came Muller! “Don’t write anything in one sentence that can’t be said in ten,” is his motto. But plough through the verbiage and discover how magnificently he buries Bouwsma and the Torrance-clan. This is the clash of the Titans with Muller playing the role of “slayer of all giants” For anyone wanting to do some serious Calvin research, this is a must-read.
Extended Bibliography:

For a “full” bibliography students may wish to consult my dissertation, Incomprehensibilitas Dei: Calvin’s Pastoral Theology in the Sermons on Job, (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales, Lampeter, 2000). I cannot guarantee a better grade for citing this work, but you may try!

A. Primary Sources:


**B. Secondary Sources:**


Incomprehensible mush. But then, Barth was never terribly concerned about the details.


The definitive biography by a man who knew Calvin. What more need one say?


Battles, the translator of the version of the Institutes we shall read in this course, has done some important work on several issues of Calvin's theology, including Calvin's use of the idea of "accommodation." The book is a collection of his essays that keep appearing in Calvin research as footnotes.

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The best technical analysis of the Institutes available. Bear in mind that this is merely an analysis of the contents of the Institutes and not a theological commentary. Useful in getting to know your way around the Institutes.


See above.


This recent translation of Cottret's biography fills a much-needed gap between the deficiencies of McGrath, the brevity of Parker and the idiosyncrasies of Bouwsma's biography of Calvin. It includes several useful appendices and chronologies.


John Murray writes: "It is difficult to find the proper superlatives by which to express one's appreciation and esteem of this volume. It is a masterpiece of scholarly research and analysis." And then he engages in a lengthy review that criticizes Dowey! [See, Collected Writings, Vol. 3, pp. 377-382.] Dowey is sounder on Calvin's basic epistemology, but unravels in issues like election and reprobation.


An introduction to Calvin and his theology illustrated with some humorous cartoons. The perspective is somewhat neo-orthodox.

It’s Sinclair Ferguson, Duh! Of course it’s good.


Gaffin’s Th.M. thesis is now available as a book (the monograph edition has been available for some time). A useful summary of Calvin’s view of the Sabbath which disintegrates the opinion held by far too many that a great chasm exists between the Puritan and Genevan understanding of the Fourth commandment from a New Covenant perspective.


A wonderful source of the very best articles on all things relating to Calvin and Calvinism.


Specialist stuff. Many have raved over it, but its pretty dull reading on the whole.


See above.


The best one-volume source of information on the totality of Calvin’s literary output. For serious students of Calvin, this is an essential work to consult.


Outstanding!


Helm’s systematic missile aimed directly at R T Kendall’s thesis focusing in particular on the question: Did Calvin believe in the particular redemption? According to Helm, the answer is a resounding “Yes!”. Kendall, J. B. Torrance, read and weep!

__________ *John Calvin’s Ideas*. Oxford University Press, 2004

Helm’s latest and most impressive attempt to date in establishing Calvin’s Doctrine of God. It is not without its critics (already!). Presuppositionalists especially dislike it! But then, Helm isn’t one

Similar in style to Peterson’s work on the word of Christ, Jansen surveys the threefold office of Christ arguing that since much of Calvin’s references are to a twofold office (king and priest), the threefold office is for Calvin a dogmatic, not an exegetical category (p. 45). John Murray disagrees with this understanding in a trenchant review, see Collected Writings, Vol. 4, 302-304.


Excellent, though in parts inadequate, treatment of the salient issues. Klooster denies that Calvin was a supralapsarian (arguing that there was an earlier and later understanding of this issue). This is undoubtedly wrong. For an in-depth and opposite view, see, Diversity within the Reformed Tradition, by J. V. Fesko (Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1999).


This book has received far more publicity than it deserves, but continues to be cited as a definitive source proving that Calvin wasn’t a Calvinist. Kendall shows scant regard for the primary sources and the work is a classic case of the thesis driving the evidence into oblivion. Responses by Helm and more significantly, Muller, have blown the thesis to smithereens.


Kingdon is the expert on life in Geneva in the sixteenth century.


Ground-breaking stuff putting Calvin back into in the mainstream of Calvinism as it developed in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Particularly important in the Calvin v. Calvinism debate that continues to muddy the waters. Lillback may well overstate his case, however.


McGrath over-simplifies and misses any theological evaluation (unpardonable!).


_______ Parker, T H L Calvin: An Introduction to his Thought Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995

The best one-volume introduction to the Institutes.


An absolutely “must-read” source for information on the whys and wherefores of Calvin’s commentary “Brevis et Facilitas” style.

An outstanding piece of work that understands Calvin without the prejudice of an imposed Calvin v Calvinism grid.


Yes, it is in French! But absolutely stunning work on Calvin’s doctrine of God.


A good biographical account of Calvin, though rarely cited these days.

Torrance, Thomas F. *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man* Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock Publishers, 1997

Torrancian gobbledygook. Many of the dates from Calvin’s sermons are in error, but the main points of all of Torrance’s studies in Calvin are to suggest, a) that Calvin owed more to John Major (a Scot!) than anyone else (this gives the non-Scottish, myself included, a case of the heebie-jeebies); b) that Calvin needs to be understood in a polar-opposite direction to the seventeenth century development of Calvinism (the Calvin v. Calvinism hypothesis). This has been ably refuted by many, but the Torrancian juggernaut trundles on and on and on...


Wallace (another Barthian) is generally sympathetic to Calvin and writes with a greater focus on pastoral issues than does, say, Parker (whose biography tends to be more academic and dry).


An outstanding compilation of quotes taken from Calvin’s sermonic output as well as the Institutes covering the major loci of the Christian Life.


Not as insightful as Gerrish’s work on this subject.


Pooh-poohed by modern scholarship on Calvin for being sycophantic and iconoclastic. But who cares, this is the definitive account of Calvin’s theology from an outstanding scholar sympathetic to Calvin’s theological insights. His treatment of Calvin’s relationship to Augustine has been superseded by research in the twentieth century showing that Calvin’s mentors were more complex than was thought in the nineteenth century, but, the basic premise — Calvin builds on Augustine — remains unchallenged.


In a private conversation with J. I. Packer one day (what a name-dropper I am!), he suggested to me that Wendel (pronounced with an initial “vo” sound — Vondel), got Calvin “right.” I cannot repeat to you here what Packer said of Bouwsma’s biography except to say that it wasn’t complimentary.


An important contribution to Calvin’s Christology.
EVALUATIONS OF THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF JOHN CALVIN:

Theodore Beza: “Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years, I have given a faithful account both of his life and of his death, and I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of the Christian character, an example which it is easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.” The Life of John Calvin he Life of John Calvin ed. Gary Sanseri Milwaukee (Oregon: Back Home Industries, 1996), 117.

William Cunningham: “John Calvin was by far the greatest of the Reformers with respect to the talents he possessed, the influences he exerted, and the services he rendered in the establishment and diffusion of important truth.” The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 292.

François Wendel: “...Calvin made such a mark upon his age and even beyond it, exercised an influence which does not yet seem likely to decline. Even more than a thinker, in the exclusive sense of the word, he was a leader of men.” Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought, Tr. Philip Mairet (Durham NC: Labyrinth Press, 1963), 360.

Ronald S. Wallace: “We may well question his insistence that zeal for the glory of God should be always our first thought and aim, even when the pursuit of it seems to lead us to deny considerations of humanity, but we have to ask ourselves whether with a more modern version of the Gospel we have not drifted into a deadly smugness.” Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Worker, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 301.

William J Bouwsma: “The result has been the identification of two Calvins, coexisting uncomfortably within the same historical personage... One of these Calvins was a philosopher, a rationalist and a schoolman in the high Scholastic tradition represented by Thomas Aquinas, a man of fixed principles, and a conservative... The other Calvin was a rhetorician and humanist, a skeptical fideist in the manner of the followers of William of Ockham, flexible to the point of opportunism, and a revolutionary in spite of himself. This Calvin did not seek, because he neither trusted nor needed, what passes on earth for intelligibility and order; instead, he was inclined to celebrate the paradoxes and mystery at the heart of existence. He also exerted the primacy of experience and practice over theory, and he had a considerable tolerance for individual freedom.” John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 230-231.

W. S. Reid: “...his influence extended far beyond the borders of the church, as it did the confines of Geneva, for many of his ideas in politics, aesthetics, science, and history became so interwoven in Western thought that we must recognize him as one of the great seminal minds, one of the formative factors in the development of Western culture and civilization.” The New International Dictionary of Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), sv. “John Calvin”
Benjamin B Warfield: “...from Luther the Reformer to our day God has given His Church no greater man than John Calvin.” Calvin and Augustine (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 26.

Will Durant: “But we shall always find it hard to love the man who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.” The Story of Civilization: Part VI The Reformation New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 490.

H. Daniel Rops: “It seems that though Calvin read his Gospel so thoroughly, he had not understood its two noblest precepts: that it behoves us to be the least important at the table end, and that we ought to love our enemies... After Calvin all hopes of repairing the rent in the Seamless Robe vanished for centuries to come” The Protestant Reformation Trans. Audrey Butler (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc./ London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1963 (1961)), 440-441.

Quotes that I’ve so far been unable to reference

Jimmy Swaggart: “Calvin has, I believe, caused untold millions of souls to be damned...”

Roland Bainton: “If Calvin ever wrote anything in favor of religious liberty, it was a typographical error.”
Calvin's principal writings

Calvin and the Bible:

Bible Translation (involved in the French edition by Olivetanus, June 4, 1535).

Commentaries

New Testament

Romans Mar 1540
(Jude, 1 & 2 Peter 1542, 1545 later completely revised)
1 & 2 Corinthians Jan 1546
Galatians, Ephesians
Philippians, Colossians Feb 1548
1 & 2 Timothy Jul 1548
Hebrews Mar 1549
Titus Nov 1549
1 & 2 Thess, Philemon Feb 1550
(James 1550 revised)
James, 1 & 2 Pet,
1 John, Jude Jan 1551
Acts 1-13 Feb 1552
John Jan 1553
Acts 14-28 Jan 1554
Synoptic Gospels Aug 1555

Old Testament

(Isaiah 1551 Notes/from lectures/student; see 1559)
Genesis July 1554
Psalms July 1557
Genesis/Exodus-Deut/
Harmony July 1563
Joshua Nov 1563

Lectures (Praelectiones)
(Strasbourg years: John and 1 Corinthians)
In Geneva:
Hosea Feb 1557
(Calvin expresses to Bullinger his doubts about this format)
Minor Prophets Feb 1560 (Fr; Lat 1559)
Daniel Aug 1561
Jeremiah, Lamentations Jul 1563
Ezekiel 1-20:44 Feb 1565

Sermons (see table of preaching schedule) begun:

SUNDAYS
95 sermons on Acts 1-15 Aug 25 1549
94 sermons on Acts 16-28 Nov 27 1552
72 sermons on Psalms Nov 17 1549
22 sermons on Psalm 119 Jan 8 1553
46 sermons on 1 & 2 Thess Mar 26 1553
55 sermons on 1 Tim Sept 16 1554
31 sermons on 2 Tim and
17 sermons on Titus April 21 1555
110 sermons on 1 Cor Oct 20 1555
66 sermons on 2 Cor Feb 28 1557
43 sermons on Galatians Nov 14 1557
48 sermons on Ephesians May 15 1558

WEEKDAYS
271 sermons on Jeremiah 1548?
25 sermons on Lam Sept 6 1550
28 sermons on Micah Nov 12 1550
17 sermons on Zeph Feb 6 1551
65 sermons on Hosea April 2 1551
17 sermons on Joel Sept 5 1551
43 sermons on Amos Oct 28 1551
5 sermons on Obadiah Feb 5 1552
(sermons on Jonah - only 6 recorded/Ragunier was sick! Many sermons lost
including series on Nahum, Habakkuk and the first four chapters of Daniel)
174 sermons on Ezekiel Nov 21 1552
159 sermons on Job Feb 26 1554
200 sermons on Deut Mar 20 1555
343 sermons on Isaiah Jul 16 1556
123 sermons on Genesis Sept 4 1559 (Ragunier dies)
Judges
107 sermons on 1 Samuel Aug 8 1561
87 sermons on 2 Samuel Feb 3 1562
1 Kings -- ?? last sermon Feb 2 1564

For a list of sermons in the Calvini Opera (CO), see de Freef 115-117.

Ecclesiastical Issues
Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship in Geneva (French)
Articles Designed for the Restoration of Peace in Geneva (Fr. 1548)
Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Fr. 1541)
A Brief and Clear Summary of the Lord's Supper (Fr. 1560)
Excuse à Messieurs les Nicodémites (1544)
Advertisement contre l'astrologie (1549)
On scandals (Fr. 1550)
Gallican Confession: Instruction et confession de foy (1537)
Les Ordonnances ecclésiastiques (1541, 1561)
Order of Visitation (1546)

Debates with Roman Catholics
Epistolae Duae (1537, Duchemin and Roussel)
Religious Colloquy in Lausanne (1536)
Correspondence with Louis Du Tillet (1538)
Responsio ad Sadoleum (1539)
Albertus Pighius
Sorbonne (1544)

Anabaptists
Psychopannychia (1542, 1545)
Brève instruction (1544)
Contre la secte phatastique des libertines (1545)
Epistre contre un certain Cordelier (1547)
Pierre Caroli

Antitrinitarians
Michael Servetus
Sebastian Costello
Gribaldi
Blandrata
Gentilis
Ecclesiastical Union

Confessio fidei de eucharistia (1537)
Consensus Tigurinus (Bullinger/Zurich) (1549)

Institutes

1536
1539
1543
1545
1550
1559

Letters
