

Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 259 pp., pbk. ISBN 9780830829217 \$25.00 (US)

The year 2009 being the 500th anniversary of the Genevan Reformer's birth, there has followed a great spate of books treating Calvin's life and career. If the curious Christian had never before taken time to read a volume treating this great man of Christian history, the centenary year has surely provided a suitable occasion. But *where* was a curious reader to begin given the avalanche of choices?

The book under review by Herman Selderhuis, the esteemed Reformed church historian of Apeldoorn, the Netherlands (a book which is itself a part of this literary outpouring connected with the centennial year) is probably *not* the right starting point for one looking to read a first book on Calvin's career. But if you have previously read a standard biography of Calvin, Selderhuis' *A Pilgrim's Life* would make an excellent follow-up. This historian, aiming at the reader who already has a rudimentary knowledge of the stages of the Genevan's life and activity, provides the kind of 'colour' material that better helps us to see Calvin as a three-dimensional person – a man of strong feeling, of vivid memory, and warm friendship. And strikingly, Selderhuis does this almost entirely reliant on Calvin's massive surviving correspondence with friends across Europe. The difference can be illustrated *thus*.

We see more clearly Calvin's *humanity*. Every biographer of Calvin will tell us that he suffered the loss of his mother while still a young boy, of his father while still a young man, and his native country (France) through exile shortly thereafter. Selderhuis, through a long familiarity with Calvin's correspondence, is able to show us how these early experiences left such an impression on the Reformer that he regularly referred to them in his dealings with others. Similarly, the indignity suffered in his forced exile from his adoptive city, Geneva, in 1538 and the pain he felt at the death of his wife, Idelette, in 1549 were items that he referred to again and again when consoling and advising others. How good to realize then that Calvin had much more to him than preaching, writing, and debating. There was this tender side also.

Further, Selderhuis helps us to see Calvin's *stridency*. Regularly over-ruled by the city government, Calvin would use his pulpit and his pen to tell his version of things. Where colleagues and contemporaries differed with Calvin, or would not see things his way, there was often a price to pay. Some friendships ended when Calvin's counsel was not heeded; sometimes very long-standing correspondence was nearly cut off without explanation.

What emerges from *A Pilgrim's Life* is a portrait of Calvin which – which while characterized by loyalty and admiration – is free from excessive adulation. The author feels no obligation to take Calvin's part in any and every confrontation he found himself in. Selderhuis, working from within the conservative side of the Dutch Reformed tradition, shows a commendable fascination with how Calvin's preferences and traits have often been transmitted to the church tradition at the head of which he stands. According to Selderhuis, we have Calvin to thank for the preference for psalm-singing, the maintenance of home-visits by elders prior to Sundays on which the Lord's Supper is administered, and also for the great readiness to 'split' with former comrades over issues deemed to be of great principle – which have often characterized the Reformed tradition.

All this deserves high commendation. The Calvin 500 festivities of 2009, whatever they may have succeeded in advancing by way of modern appreciation for the great Reformer, have not significantly expanded our ability to draw *critically* on Calvin's life and career. As the celebratory year draws near to an end, we are left too much at the mercy of persons and authors whose approach to Calvin and the Reformation is, at bottom, one which commends a drawing of the sixteenth century into the twenty-first. On this plan, our great need is to be and to live more like sixteenth-century people. Selderhuis' sane approach properly recognizes the distance of time and culture which separates modern Protestant Christians from Calvin's time (such that we cannot simply copy it). We justifiably no longer consent to the burning of witches and heretics. He pinpoints also the operation within the Reformed tradition of a kind of 'law of unintended consequences' which has sometimes yielded effects other than were originally intended. Thus, today Calvin's emphasis on extreme austerity and simplicity in houses of worship and the ordering of services, can hamstring his modern followers in coming to terms with a culture very different from that of four centuries ago.

Read a standard biography of Calvin. There is much to be learned from established works such as that of Williston Walker (1906), Emmanuel Stickelberger (1954), Jean Cadier (1960), T.H.L. Parker (1975) and Alister McGrath (1990). But when you have digested one, take Selderhuis as your second and observe how the combination makes for a sane and balanced whole.

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