

Commendations for *Reformation Letters*

‘In this fascinating monograph on Calvin’s letters, Michael Parsons compares the personal responses of Calvin to life’s difficult circumstances, found in his letters to close friends, with his doctrinal theology written for the church. For instance, in one particularly engrossing chapter, Parsons probes how Calvin dealt with his own pervasive grief over the death of his wife and close friends in light of Calvin’s firm conviction of the complete sovereignty of God in human affairs found in other writings. The humanity and piety of Calvin is demonstrated equally so in Parsons’ exploration of Calvin’s correspondence addressing the subjects of vocation and calling, marriage, the fiery execution of Servetus, and the persecution of believers of the evangelical faith in France. I loved this book. Its real strength is in revealing the humanity of Calvin against his official theology.’

Mary Patton Baker, All Souls Anglican Church, Wheaton, IL.

‘Michael Parsons’ latest volume that explores the letters of John Calvin on pertinent subjects (as current as martyrdom) shows us the unnoticed, compassionate side of the Genevan reformer. Like discovering a previously blocked social media account from the Sixteenth Century, the chapters on grief, calling, marriage, affliction, and other topics, reveal to a modern audience the *pathos* of an earlier generation—admirable in so many respects—that is not gleaned from merely reading tracts and volumes. Parsons is a careful and caring guide, who seems to understand the sentiments of a giant of the faith that others studiously miss. Rather than slogging through all Calvin’s letters with little thematic guidance, this fine volume does the work for the reader to get to the heart of matters. At times, each paragraph of Parsons’ well-written narrative shouts (or whispers) to read slowly . . . for the matters covered herein are well worth reading thoughtfully. This is history at its finest—we know the reformer through these letters, thanks to an expert avatar. A fantastic and interesting work!’

David W. Hall, Executive Director, Calvin500; and Sr. Pastor, Midway Presbyterian Church, Powder Springs, Georgia, USA.

‘Through his exploration of John Calvin’s letters, Michael Parsons’ work offers important insights into the life and mind of the great Genevan reformer. Parsons succeeds in correcting misperceptions of Calvin as drastically different in his theological and polemical writings than in his personal correspondence by offering a complex portrait of Calvin as “essentially a pastoral theologian”. He adeptly demonstrates how Calvin’s letters and theological writings consistently reveal his pastoral heart. Covering a variety of topics in discrete essays, Parsons offers a realistic picture of Calvin as a husband, a friend, a pastor, a statesman, and a struggling follower of Christ who wrote with empathy, passion, anger, trepidation, tenderness, and wisdom. At heart, Calvin was a man seeking to glorify God and encouraging others to do the same, whether it be in their theological beliefs, marriage, or when facing persecution, grief, or prison.’

Karin Spiecker Stetina, Lecturer in Theology, Wheaton College.

‘Michael Parsons has done an excellent job in making Calvin’s letters accessible to us, and helping us listen to Calvin in his personal and pastoral life and role. . . . The book is both scholarly and informative, and will be of benefit to everyday readers and scholars alike. It is a notable example of the combination of scholarship and usefulness!’

From the Foreword by Peter Adam, Former Principal of Ridley Theological College, Melbourne.

Reformation Letters

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A Fresh Reading of John Calvin's Correspondence

Michael Parsons

Foreword by Peter Adam

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REFORMATION LETTERS

A Fresh Reading of John Calvin's Correspondence

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for my wife, Becky

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Preface

The Reformation period is fascinating: a period of upheaval and violence, a time of change and entrenchment, and a Church that really should have known better. A few good men and women, who clung to Christ and to his gospel of grace, changed the course of European and ecclesiastical history. Amongst the second generation, and preeminent in many ways, was the reformer, John Calvin. A refugee from his beloved France, a displaced person (in human terms), but ‘placed’ by divine purpose, a pastor and teacher of the Scriptures, he epitomises what it is to be called and to be determined to answer that call with courage and fortitude. Certainly not without weaknesses and faults, he laboured for Christ and for his people.

Above all, I think, Calvin was a pastor. His letters show this—at least, the ones I’ve chosen for this book do. Whether he’s writing on marriage or calling, on suffering or grief, he exemplifies this characteristic. His defence of the Huguenots to Francis I and his rigorous defence of the Reformation, itself, against Cardinal Sadoletto, indicate as much. Though he’s a distinguished theologian, of course, his letters are well worth studying. I trust the following pages will demonstrate that. I hope, too, that through them we will see something of Calvin’s faith and of his God. Though clearly ‘of his time,’ the contemporary Church could learn a lesson or two from this great man.

I am grateful to Mary Patton Baker, David W. Hall and Karin Spiecker Stetina for reading the entire manuscript and commending it. I am also grateful to John Rupnow, Director of Edwin Mellen Press, for permission to use and to revise material from my earlier book, *Luther and Calvin on Grief*, for chapter 6 of the present work. Thank you to Paternoster, for publishing this work. Thank you, too, to Peter Adam for generously reading the manuscript, giving kind feedback and for writing the Foreword for the present work.

As this is my final academic work on the Reformation (see the Appendix), I would like to thank one or two scholars who have encouraged me in the past and continue to do so through personal conversation and through their own scholarship: John L. Thompson, Donald K. McKim, Dennis Ngien, Mark Thompson, Peter Matheson, Neil R. Leroux, Andre A. Gazal, David W. Hall and Mary Patton Baker. Fellowship in the scholarly endeavor is a wonderful and enriching thing!

Finally, the work is entirely my own!

I dedicate *Reformation Letters* to my wife, Becky, whom I love.

Michael Parsons
November, 2015

Foreword

We have much to learn from Christians who live in other places and other times. We can do this by listening to people from other countries. We can also do it by listening to people from other ages. It is especially useful to listen to people who lived in formative times in the history of Christianity. As we come to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we have good reason to look again at that age and that movement. We need to understand our past to understand our present. And we need to see that past with new eyes and ears, with new questions, and with new insights. And so it is beneficial to listen to John Calvin, not only in his *Institutes*, not only in his commentaries, but also in his letters. Michael Parsons has done an excellent job in making Calvin's letters accessible to us, and helping us listen to Calvin in his personal and pastoral life and role.

From Calvin's letters we gain deep insights into the answers of two important questions: What was it like to be a gospel believer in the 16th century in Europe? And, What was it like to be a gospel minister in the 16th century in Europe? As we learn about the person, we also learn about his friends, his church, his ministry, his daily life, his frustrations, hopes and joys, as we also learn about the world in which he lived, the church in which he served, and the day-by-day issues, problems, tragedies and triumphs of the Reformations in different places and countries in Europe.

Michael Parsons serves as an excellent guide and interpreter. He provides the background necessary for us to understand the letters, and also to see their significance for Calvin, and for the church and the world in which he lived and served. He places the letters under the useful themes of Calvin on ministry; Calvin on marriage; his letter to Francis 1 king of France, which introduces *The Institutes*; his reply to Cardinal Sadoletto; letters concerning the heretic Servetus; letters about grief; and letters about and to martyrs. This covers a wide range of Calvin's interests and activities, and provides new and fascinating perspectives on the great reformer, and on the church in Europe. The book is both scholarly and informative, and will be of benefit to everyday readers and scholars alike. It is a notable example of the combination of scholarship and usefulness!

In the words of Kevin Vanhoozer, 'The Golden Rule, for hermeneutic and ethics alike, is to treat others—texts, persons, God—with love and respect.' Those who treat Calvin and his letters with love and respect cannot but be enriched by reading them. And in this book Michael Parsons proves to be a useful and perceptive guide to help us understand and appreciate them.

Peter Adam
Former Principal of Ridley Theological College, Melbourne.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘relentless drive to relate theory and practice’.¹ John Calvin’s letters

John Calvin’s writings and, indeed, his theology generally, has always been the subject of extreme views and prejudiced judgement—ever since he put pen to paper in the sixteenth century. This partisan thinking can happen in either direction, as it were. Some enthusiastic writers champion the reformer and his views no matter what, others certainly do not. As an example of the latter, negative approach we might take Henry F. Henderson’s early, short work on John Calvin’s letters, *Calvin in his Letters*, published in 1909.² In the introductory chapter to that work he shows his hand rather overtly, it seems to me. By that remark I mean to intimate that at times he makes it clear that he writes in order to show something of the humanity of a man *he simply does not like*. For instance, he speaks of Calvin as a man who ‘awes and repels us’ through his theology, revealed in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and elsewhere. He continues, ‘His teaching seems forbidding, some of his public acts are barbarous.’ Then, he concedes a point in relation to the reformer’s correspondence: ‘But,’ he says, ‘in his letters we see a better side to his nature. . . . In his letters, it is like seeing him face to face, and speaking to him as a man speaks to a friend.’³ This qualified negativity becomes a recurrent theme that runs throughout the whole book. Later, for example, Henderson states that we are apt to think of Calvin as ‘an unlovable and unsympathetic man. We associate him in our minds with hard and gloomy theological ideas. . . . [But],’ he says, ‘besides the stern and unyielding figure that repels and alarms us there is a Calvin who wins us by his

¹ A.E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 220.

² Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in his Letters* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996; originally published by J.M. Dent in 1909). On Calvin’s letters, generally, see Douglas Kelly, ‘The Transmission and Translation of the Collected Letters of John Calvin,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30.5 (1977), 429-37. See, also, two excellent, though more narrowly-focused essays by C.J. Blaisdell: ‘Calvin’s Letters to Women: The Courting of Ladies in High Places,’ *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13 (1982), 67-85; and, ‘Calvin’s and Loyola’s Letters to Women’ in R.V. Schnucker (ed.), *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin* (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 235-53.

³ Henderson, *Calvin in his Letters*, 16. One imagines that Henderson has in mind here the apparently harsh sentence against the heretic, Michael Servetus. See chapter 5 of the present volume for an examination of this tragic situation.

large-hearted humanity, and even by his betrayal of attractive human weakness.⁴ So, he suggests that we read and study the reformer's letters *in order* to appreciate that there is another side to the reformer, a side that softens the daunting and dislikeable characteristics disclosed in his major writings and public reforming career.

I want to distance myself straightaway from such an extreme and largely ludicrous view; one that so artificially divides between the theology and the letters, one that implies two Calvins, as it were. I neither want to attack nor to advocate for the reformer. That is adamantly *not* the reason for this present short volume on John Calvin's letters. However, in decades of reading and writing on the Reformation I have found John Calvin, and Martin Luther, for that matter, to be passionate for what they considered to be truth, but also generally to be pastoral and compassionate in their response to others—men and women, kings and commoners, ecclesiasts and laity, evangelical and those of a different persuasion. John Calvin was a man of great strength and character and, sometimes, of obvious weakness and failure, and lacking in self-confidence. We are at times forcefully reminded of the scriptural comment about another: 'he was a human being, even as we are'.⁵ That needs to be remembered.

In my work, *Luther and Calvin on Grief* (2013)⁶ I demonstrate the reformers' humanity as they come to terms with their own loss and grief and as they struggle to find a pastoral path through that of others. In my earlier published doctoral research, *Reformation Marriage* (2011), I argue their humanity in the familial (albeit, patriarchal) sphere.⁷ Indeed, a careful reading of Calvin's major writings—including the *Institutes*, his polemical writings, his sermons, and so on—reveals him to be as he is in his correspondence. It seems to me that there is no substantial difference. Calvin is essentially a pastoral theologian; or, in reverse, his theology is fundamentally pastoral. And, of course, this much has been incrementally accepted over the years since Henderson wrote on the reformer's letters at the turn of the last century.⁸

⁴ Henderson, *Calvin in his Letters*, 26.

⁵ James 5.17—a comment referring to Elijah in the original instance, of course.

⁶ Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin on Grief. Life Experience and Biblical Text* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2013).

⁷ Michael Parsons, *Reformation Marriage. The Husband and Wife Relationship in the Theology of Luther and Calvin* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011; originally published by Rutherford House in 2005).

⁸ See, for example, the excellent early work by Richard Stauffer, *L'humanité de Calvin* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1964). Also, amongst others, P.E. Hughes, 'John Calvin: The Man Whom God Subdued' in J.I. Packer (ed.), *How Shall They Hear?* (Stoke-on-Trent: Tentraker, 1960), 5-10; D. Hourticq, *Calvin, mon ami* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1963); Stanford Reid, 'John Calvin, Pastoral Theologian,' *Reformed Theological Review* 42.3 (1982), 65-72; A. Perrot, *Le visage humain de Calvin* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1986); Takasaki Takeshi, 'Calvin's Theology as Pastoral Theology,' *Reformed Review* 57.3 (1998), 220-41; W. Robert Godfrey, 'The Counsellor

Having said that, however, the present volume is not simply a championing of the reformer. That, too, would be misguided; a misreading of the history and the corpus. The present work recognises his weakness and failings, as well as his many strengths. Nor am I unaware of William Naphy's critique that Calvin's letters are over-rated and that they are merely a 'masterful', propaganda for the Reformed city of Geneva.⁹ Nevertheless, even if we take on board that somewhat exaggerated comment in our reading and interpretation of the reformer's correspondence on the more political matters (which I am not necessarily fully inclined to do), we find that the letters *are* significant in discerning the reformer's career and pastoral theology and concerns.

There is in his letters vulnerability and warmth that surface at times in other works, but which appear more clearly when he writes to friends and colleagues, or to those in distress. We would expect this, of course. In his letters, there are grand moments of decisiveness and, at times, instances of reticence, too. Calvin writes as a husband, a friend, a pastor, a statesman; he writes with compassion, anger, insight, deference, but always with theological and exegetical acumen. John Thompson's comment on Calvin's biblical writing is perhaps relevant to his letters. He remarks that 'Virtually every aspect of daily life—not just preaching and sacraments, but also marriage and divorce, family life, commerce and consumption, as well as politics on every scale—was charged with theological and thus exegetical implications.'¹⁰

The following chapters certainly attempt to recognise this aspect of the reformer's letter-writing. Each chapter is a discrete essay, as such, but, of course, the volume as a whole offers a cumulative perspective on the Genevan reformer. It will be seen that each chapter argues a point, sometimes against the perspective of relevant secondary literature, at other times simply attempting to

to the Afflicted' in Burk Parsons (ed.), *John Calvin. A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine and Doxology* (Lake Mary: Reformation Trust, 2008), 83-93; Christoph Strohm, 'Beobachtungen zur Elgenart der Theologie Calvins' *Evangelische Theologie* 69.2 (2009), 85-100; Sinclair B. Ferguson, 'Calvin the Man: A Heart Aflame' in J.R. Beeke and G.J. Williams (eds), *Calvin. Theologian and Reformer* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 7-24.

⁹ William G. Naphy, 'Calvin's Letters: Reflections on their Usefulness in Studying Genevan History,' *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 86 (1995), 89.

¹⁰ John L. Thompson, 'Calvin as a biblical interpreter' in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59. In a similar way Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 220, emphasises that, generally, Calvin shows a 'relentless drive to relate theory and practice'. See also, B. Armstrong, '*Duplex cognitio Dei*, Or the Problem and Relation of Structure, Form and Purpose in Calvin's Theology' in E.A. McKee and B. Armstrong (eds), *Probing the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 142, who is correct in saying that, 'Calvin simply does not understand theology to be partly theoretical and partly practical. It is always at once practical and edifying.'

observe more carefully what Calvin says on a particular topic. In outline, the volume covers the following subjects.

Chapter 1 examines the reformer's letters on his calling and recall (after expulsion) to pastoral ministry in Geneva and demonstrates that Calvin felt inadequate for the task of leading the Church in that city. I argue—against the background of the reformational importance of the city and Calvin's intransigent theory of calling (*vocatio*)—that the situation around the reformer's recall was more complex than saying, as some do, that somehow he just 'hated' Geneva per se—the city, the people or the politics.

Having written at length on the subject,¹¹ chapter 2 takes another look at Calvin's theology of marriage and, particularly, his now (in)famous words after Idelette's untimely death that 'From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance.'¹² The brief essay argues against a superficial reading and for a more nuanced understanding of his comment, viewing it through the 'second lens' of public or Church good, as opposed to the 'first lens' of private or personal good. It is argued that the reformer's view of marriage (or of his wife, specifically) is not cold and utilitarian as has sometimes been suggested,¹³ but that his wider and controlling consideration is the overall good of the Church to which both he and his wife are called by divine grace.

Chapter 3 is an examination of Calvin's prefatory letter to Francis I, King of France, which he penned for his first edition of the *Institutes*, but perhaps surprisingly retained in every further edition—even long after Francis' death. Against secondary literature that appears to define the purpose of the *Institutes* by that letter, this chapter argues that the letter may have been retained in subsequent editions in order to demonstrate and to underline the Church's continued perseverance against the troublesome persecution in France. By grace, the Church remains though the king's existence is short-lived.

Chapter 4 discusses, against some current innovative ecumenical interpretation, the reformer's response to the Catholic Cardinal Sadoletto. It shows that the theological differences between the two scholars are both real and substantial, precluding the possibility that emphases in language and rhetoric are the main differences. Against the Cardinal's continual rhetoric of fear directed towards the Genevan leaders and population, Calvin presents the gospel of the God of grace and of Jesus Christ, revealed in his Word and preached by the Reformed leadership.

¹¹ See footnote 7 above.

¹² Letter to Viret, April 7, 1549, Calvin, *Letters*, 2.216. For the most part, throughout this present volume I am employing John Calvin, *Letters*, 4 volumes (edited by Jules Bonnet; translated by Marcus R. Gilchrist; Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, 1858). See, also, John Calvin, *Lettres françaises*, 2 volumes (edited by Jules Bonnet; Paris: Meyrueis, 1854) and *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* [CO] (Corpus Reformatorum: Brunswick: Schwetschke et Filium, 1863–1900).

¹³ See, for example, the absurd conclusion of R.H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1974), 87, that Calvin might as well have married a plank!