

EXCERPT



## *An Explorer's Guide to John Calvin*

July 12, 2022 | \$22, 256 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0126-4

*"This not just another book on Calvin but a personal and very readable account of the life and doctrine of the Genevan Reformer. Calvin's theological relevance is made clear, classic misunderstandings are cleared up and put aside, and the picture of a man devoted to serving God and the church is painted as a mirror to the reader."*

**Herman Selderhuis**, professor of church history at the Theological University of Apeldoorn and president of the Reformation Research Consortium

## Calvin's Lasting Impact in the Global Church

As a sixteenth-century Reformer, Calvin brought significant changes to the church that he led in Geneva. Yet the changes and renewals he implemented in his time did not affect only that city or last only during his lifetime. They went far beyond the geographical boundaries of one city, or one country, or even one continent. Calvin's thoughts and church practices have impacted Christianity all over the world for almost five centuries.

Calvin was a second-generation Reformer. When you think about the Reformation of the sixteenth century, you might think right away of Martin Luther. And that's understandable. Luther initiated changes in the church, moving it away from the medieval theology and practices that he believed to be incorrect and unbiblical. While Luther wanted to change many things about the church, at the center of his disagreement with the church was the issue of justification, or salvation, by grace alone. The medieval church in which Luther grew up taught that we are saved by God's grace in Christ together with our good works. In addition, the church taught that God still required a temporal punishment for sins people had not confessed, sins that had not been pardoned by God through the authority of the church. And even after sins were confessed, the church insisted God's justice had not been satisfied, and therefore people still needed to receive punishment. They would undergo this punishment in purgatory after they died. Remission of that punishment was made available by the church in the form of an *indulgence*. In practice, the church could issue a letter to a person to demonstrate a certain kind of penance. It later devised a plan that would allow people to bypass their time in purgatory if they purchased a letter that the church issued, called a "letter of indulgence." When people purchased a letter, depending on the sum of money they paid, they could secure complete freedom from purgatory. And even better, they could also purchase letters of indulgence for other people, such as their parents, who had died and were believed to be going through the fire of purgatory. Luther disagreed with the selling of the letter of indulgences because the practice diminished the significance of the death of Christ for our salvation and put at the center of our salvation "good works" in the form of purchasing the letter. Following the teaching of the Bible, Luther emphasized that salvation is only by the grace of God.

In this and other respects, Calvin continued Luther's work. The two didn't agree on every point, but in his teachings Calvin, like Luther before him, consistently argued that we are only saved by God's grace. We can do nothing to earn our own salvation. But Calvin did not stop with making changes in the theological teaching of the church. He developed an extensive plan to implement the changes. The first step he took was to insist on people's knowledge of the teaching of Scripture. Still in the footsteps of Luther, Calvin wanted people to worship, hear the Bible and sermons, say their prayers, and recite their creed all in their own mother tongue. Luther had started this by translating the Bible into German. Before Luther, Latin was the language of the Western church. You can easily imagine that ordinary people living in Germany who only spoke German would not have had a clue what the priests said at Mass. Before the Reformation, people went to church not to understand the message of the Bible but only to receive the Eucharist, which would later amount to the grace of God, or salvation. While there was beautiful music in the church, the choir sang in Latin, so ordinary people did not actively participate in the singing. They were there only to partake of the Eucharist.

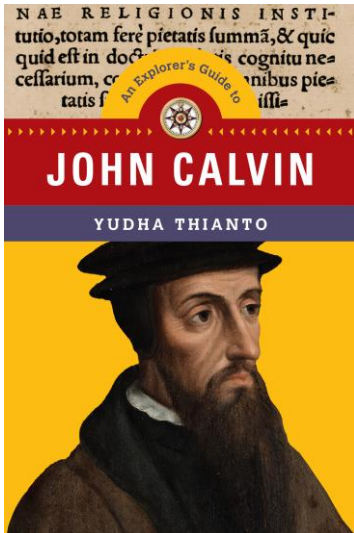
Calvin wanted the people in Geneva to hear sermons in French so that they could understand them well. In addition, he wanted people to sing the psalms, recite the Apostles' Creed, and pray the Lord's Prayer in French. He intended that all these participatory activities at church should be integral parts of worship that would build people's understanding of God,



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themselves, and their relationship with God. Therefore, in matters concerning worship, Calvin worked hard to ensure that people gained knowledge of God by regularly going to church. He developed a way for the church in Geneva to sing the psalms that were easy for them, putting the texts into metrical form in the familiar language. Calvin's insistence on including the congregation in singing at church is one of the lasting influences of Calvin on the church all these years later. Calvin was not the only Reformer who sought to change how the church worshiped, but his emphases upon hearing God's Word and singing the psalms have deeply informed the church to this day.

The Reformation of the church that took place under Calvin in Geneva was not just about theological doctrine and worship in the church. It was also intended to reform people's lives. To ensure this, Calvin insisted on church discipline, which was upheld by a body called the Consistory, consisting of all the ministers of the church in Geneva and twelve councilors from the different councils of the city. I will discuss the Consistory later in this book. At this point, I just want to underline that as a leader, Calvin wanted to ensure that people became followers of Christ who would know the teaching of the Bible and live accordingly. The Consistory was there to ensure that the people did both. While it is perhaps understandable that Calvin had to take such an approach in maintaining discipline, it is also understandable that people did not like such strict discipline. In subsequent years and even centuries, the Consistory has received a bad reputation. However, Calvin's insistence on discipline has had a lasting impact on Christians all over the world by showing how Christian faith must be reflected in daily living.

Another important aspect of Calvin's influence concerned the understanding of marriage and the place of children in the church. Before the Reformation, the way people got married was much different than it is today. In medieval Europe, a man and a woman could go together to a tavern, drink in the name of marriage in the presence of witnesses or promise to be married to each other, and right away they would be considered married. Then they would engage in a sexual relationship right after the promise of marriage. Of course, this practice led to a variety of problems. First, it would be rather difficult to make a distinction between a promise to be married and social drinking at taverns. One party, either the man or the woman, might easily deny that they intended to be married when they drank together. Most often it was the men who would deny that a marriage took place, but there were cases when the women denied that they had the intention to be married when they drank with the other party. Another problem that often arose was the practice of polygamy. Let's imagine a man whose line of work required him to travel from one town to another. He might get married in one town then repeat the act in another. In those days communication between people living in different towns was not as easy as it is today. Therefore, people—most likely men—could potentially be married multiple times in different places. To prevent this from happening, the church in Geneva developed a new practice. The church order of 1541 contained a regulation that couples should be married at church, that the ceremony should take place on a day when there was a church service, and that the couple's intention to marry should be announced prior to the intended day of their wedding. This practice, called the marriage banns, became standard. Interestingly, if you go to Indonesia today, you will still find similar practices in many of the churches of various theological persuasions, including Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and many others.

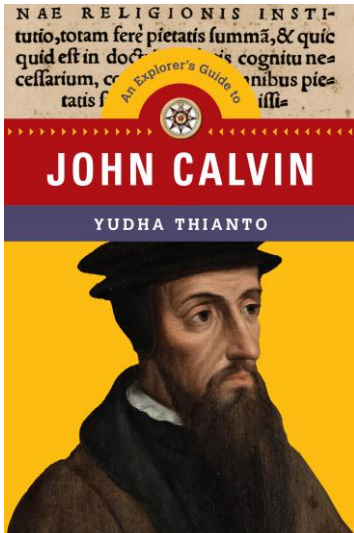
Children were an important feature of Calvin's ministry and theology. He believed that children should receive instruction in the faith while still young. One good way of teaching children is through singing. The church order published in Geneva in 1541, which provided guidance on how the church should operate there, states that the little children should be taught how to sing the psalms. Even though Calvin's name is not written as the author of the church order, I believe Calvin was primarily behind its publication. The church order implies that by teaching young children to sing the psalms, the church could be sure that when the children grow up, they will carry with them the knowledge of God and his words. When the church teaches children to sing,



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these children will go home and sing the psalms there. As they do, their parents will hear the psalms in French, and they will learn too. What a marvelous idea! Calvin was empowering the children to teach their parents.

The parents of these children were born and raised in the medieval church, where they did not participate in worship, did not receive enough teaching of the Bible, were not accustomed to hearing sermons in their own language, and did not recite the creed and pray in their mother tongue. It was hard for these parents and adults to undergo change as they joined the Reformed church even before Calvin arrived in Geneva in 1536. These adults needed more time to adjust themselves and to embrace the newness that the Reformation brought. But the children were different. Many of them were born after the Reformation. Therefore, they started their Christian lives already in the context of the new church. In Geneva, the children in school received instruction on psalm singing from a precentor every day. The children in turn led the congregational singing at worship services, under the guidance of the precentor. By empowering the children to sing and to bring the message of the psalms home, Calvin effectively helped the adults transition into the new church.

Still fixing his eyes on the young children, Calvin thought very hard about giving them further instruction in the faith. To that end, he wrote and published several catechisms during his lifetime. Catechisms did not originate with Calvin. Long before the Reformation, the early and medieval churches had used catechisms or catechetical materials. Before Calvin's time, Luther had already published his Small Catechism in 1529 as a way to help parents teach the rudiments of the Christian faith to their children at home. Calvin took another step by using the catechism as a link between baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two sacraments of the Protestant churches. As was common church practice in the day among both the majority of the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin's church in Geneva baptized infants. As these baptized children grew, they needed instruction to help them understand the teaching of the Bible. These youngsters were not allowed to partake in the Lord's Supper until they made their profession of faith when they were old enough to understand. These children had to go through catechism classes that the church held every Sunday at noon. The catechism books that Calvin published were the material used to instruct the young people. I'm sure some of my readers will have also been through catechism classes at church. And even if you did not have that experience, I hope you will agree with me that faith formation of children is important and that the church must take an active role in educating the young. This is another one of Calvin's lasting influences in the church.

People often think of Calvin as a dour, stern, and cold theologian who only thought about doctrines. However, I find him to be a warm pastor who cared deeply about God's people and whose influence on his own tradition and the global church is undeniable. I hope in the next chapters you will meet a man who loved God deeply and who did all that he could to ensure that people would get to know God intimately, worship him with all their hearts, and live as Christians who glorify God all the days of their lives.

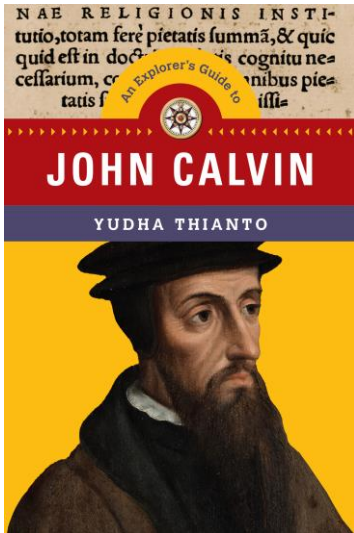
—Taken from chapter one, "Why John Calvin?"



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## DETAILS



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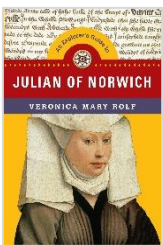
In this careful study of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Reformed theologian Yudha Thianto sets Calvin's writings in their historical context and outlines the significant aspects of his theology for those who would know more about Calvin's works and through it, the God who inspired them.

## Explorer's Guides Series

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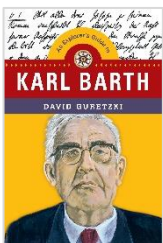
Written by scholars with years of expertise, these volumes will acquaint readers with the sometimes unfamiliar context in which these classic texts were written and help readers navigate the rich yet often complex terrain of Christian theology. New and experienced readers alike will benefit from these volumes as they continue on their journey of faith.



### *An Explorer's Guide to Julian of Norwich*

Veronica Mary Rolf | June 12, 2018 | \$22, 240 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5088-4

Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* is truly an astounding work: an inspiring example of Christian mysticism, a unique contribution to Christian theology, the first book in English known to have been written by a woman. Veronica Mary Rolf guides us as we read, examining its fourteenth-century context and illuminating our understanding of this enduring work.



### *An Explorer's Guide to Karl Barth*

David Guretzki | November 2, 2016 | \$20, 225 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5137-9

If ever a theologian required a guidebook, it would be Karl Barth. David Guretzki has gathered numerous hints and notes throughout decades of study for how best to explore the writings of the Swiss theologian. This handy, accessible guide offers a brief snapshot of the key texts, terms, and ideas that any new reader of Barth's work needs to know.



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