

CALVIN STUDIES: A REVIEW
The Work of the Calvin Congresses and
Their Future Tasks and Goals

William H. Neuser

I. Historical Survey

A. The International Congress for Calvin Research

The International Congress has as a predecessor the European Congress for Calvin Research. Approximately forty European researchers met in 1974 at the Free University of Amsterdam for that Congress. There it was determined that there should be regular meetings every four years. It was also decided that researchers from the entire world should be invited to the next meeting. To oversee this program, a small and effective presidium was elected of representatives from the most important countries in which Calvin research was being done. An early work of the presidium was the publication of the papers of the first Congress in 1976 in Neukirchen in a volume entitled *Calvinus Theologus*, an honorary title conferred on Calvin by Melanchthon.

The first meeting of the International Congress, in 1978, was once again held at the Free University of Amsterdam. Researchers came from all around the world (with the exception of Australia). It was there decided that only a small group of the finest researchers should henceforth be invited, plus a few younger scholars, but not more than one hundred. It was established from the beginning that only one lecture should be held in the morning, one in the afternoon, and one in the evening, and that each lecture should be followed by a very intense discussion. The Congress would form, as it were, a large seminar. The lectures were to relate to a major theme in Calvin research, with the idea that a unified, thematic approach would produce the most effective impulses for further research. I think we have been successful. The papers of that Congress were published in Kampen in 1980 under the title *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor*.

The next Congress was held in the city of Calvin in 1982. A series of additional seminars were now included on two afternoons. Those seminars discussed small, controversial themes or new directions of research, and once again, participants were invited to engage in an intense discussion. The seminars proved to be valuable and have been maintained. Also at Geneva the morning devotions in the *Auditoire de Calvin* made a lasting impression on those who took part. The lectures and seminar presentations were published by Peter Lang in 1984 with the title *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*. As previously, one finds in the title of that work a salutation or letter-heading of Calvin.

The fourth Congress, invited and hosted by the Reformed Church of Hungary, met in 1986 at the Reformed Academy in Debrecen. The opening was held in the "Grosse Kirche," the cathedral, with a large congregation: The very famous choir of the Gymnasium aided in the celebration. The celebratory lecture discussed Calvin's *Institutio*, which was 450 years old that year. The lectures and seminar presentations were published at the Press of the Reformed Academy of Budapest in 1988 under the title *Calvinus Servus Christi*.

The next International Congress will be held this year (1990) in Grand Rapids; In 1994 the Congress will be held in Edinburgh.

B. Regional Congresses and Centers

(1) The meetings of the Calvin Studies Society, held every two years, usually at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, make up the oldest of the regional congresses. It is not a "child" of the International Congress. The proceedings of three of these meetings are available in spiral binding.¹

(2) The Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, made possible by a generous foundation, is also in Grand Rapids. It is on the way to being one of the most influential centers for Calvin research, of which we unfortunately have few in the world. Calvin research is usually produced by single researchers. The library of the Meeter Center attempts to collect all publications on Calvin and has created an excellent starting place for the dissemination of Calvin research in North America. *The Meeter Center Newsletter* regularly informs us of its activities.

(3) In 1980 there were two new regional Calvin Congresses. The first was the African Congress for Calvin Research that always meets in the years midway between the International Congresses. It began in 1980 in Pretoria and met once again in 1984 in Potchefstroom and in 1988 in Stellenbosch. The lectures of the first two congresses have been published.² The last congress was united with the celebration of the coming of the Huguenots to the Cape three hundred years earlier. The congress regularly invites European and American researchers so that they can have closer contacts with international research.

(4) The second regional Calvin congress beginning in 1980 is found in Eastern Europe, held in 1980 in Debrecen, in East Berlin in 1984, and in 1988 in Vienna. It too collects a number of researchers from many lands. (The official name is Calvin Congress of Middle East Europe.) In earlier times one had considered this area to be a part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, but the area is now larger, as it also includes the German Democratic Republic and Poland. The lectures of 1984 and 1988 have been published.³ The presidium supports this smaller congress by participating in their meetings. Afterwards, it takes the opportunity to prepare the program of the next international congress.

(5) In 1987 the East Asian Calvin Congress met for the first time in Singari (near Kobe), Japan. Many participants came from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and also a few from the Philippines. The elected coordinator is Professor Watanabe of Tokyo. The Congress has determined to meet every two years. In October of 1989 the Second Asian Congress met in Seoul, South Korea. Mr. Gamble and I attended the congress and gave lectures. The lectures of those congresses were not published. Among the researchers from East Asia one already finds a few of international quality. It's characteristic to this people to make contact with international research with great determination. In Seoul, a Calvin society meets regularly.

(6) Lastly, there is the Colloquium on Calvin Studies which meets every other year in Davidson, North Carolina, and the lectures of the last four have been reproduced.⁴ In Edinburgh, Scotland, there is a meeting each month of a group of Calvin students.

One consequence of the first International Congress is the unexpected impulses which have proceeded from this congress. The many regional congresses may serve as

proof. However, beyond that one may ascertain a growing search among the researchers to know Calvin's writings precisely, to immerse themselves in Calvin's thought, and also to draw out from this a usefulness for piety and the church. The expectations they have for the International Congress are high. The presidium is cognizant of, and has been working toward doing justice to these expectations, as reflected in its programs. It is from this vantage point that further questions are positioned concerning the content and the goals of Calvin research.

II. The Work

A. From the beginning, the *Theology of Calvin* has been the main point of research for the International Congress. Still lacking is a book with this title which speaks appropriately of present research in this area. The closest to an adequate representation of the theology of Calvin are: Peter Brunner, *Vom Glauben bei Calvin* (Tübingen, 1925); Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Munich, 1938; English translation, Philadelphia, 1956, Grand Rapids, 1980); Francois Wendel, *Calvin, Sources et evolution de sa pensee religieuse* (Paris, 1950; English translation, New York/Evanston 1950; German translation, Munich 1968); Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Göttingen, 1957); Heribert Schützeichel, *Die Glaubenstheologie Calvins* (Munich, 1972); Don McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1984). The last is a group work that naturally does not give a unified direction. The titles of these books demonstrate that none is a complete theology of Calvin. It is apparent that we must still wait a while for a presentation of the theology of Calvin.

Until then, we have a number of monographs which approach single issues. In them are oftentimes impressive results from intense Calvin research. Certainly there are still areas that deserve further research. For example, in the Calvin Congress in 1990 there will be a seminar on the "Syllogismus Practicus," yet Calvin never used that expression. What expression did he use? He surely treated this teaching frequently, as is maintained in the literature. I would further suggest that Calvin's understanding of "Heilsgeschichte" (not federal theology!), his theory of knowledge, and Oecolampadius's influence on Calvin's exegesis all need to be researched.

Minimally, I would like to clarify by using as an example the problem of Calvin's theory of knowledge. There must be a philosophical presupposition used by Calvin *and* by his present interpreters. Some interpret the thought of Calvin as being static, that is, following Greek thought. Others see it as dynamic, that is, following a Hebraic line. I remind you, this same question of interpretation is present like a giant crevice in today's New Testament research. Was Paul basically a Jew in this thought and spoke accordingly on the *acts* of God? Or, on the other hand, was he a Hellenist and defined the *being* of God? I think that he thought in a Jewish fashion, but nevertheless used Hellenistic expressions; and that makes his organization so difficult to classify. The same applies to Calvin's exegesis. For until today the Western world thinks in ontic-Greek categories: For example, is the "Logos" idea a law for Hellenistic thinking as an event and not a proclamation, or is the "gospel" a content and at the same time preaching something that happens? But wasn't Calvin (and equally Luther) able to duplicate to some extent the active, dynamic thought of the Bible? I think yes, with the exception of the doctrine of the Lord's supper, occasioned through the Lord's-supper controversy.⁵ Therefore I ask: Does our own thinking stand in the way of a proper understanding of Calvin? I am afraid so.

Certainly the question is made more comprehensible after the time of the Reformation within Calvinist orthodoxy's understanding of Calvin. At this place the

theological presuppositions of the researcher and his church come into play. Let's go back to Calvin's theology.

Again, in the future it would be good to have a deeper penetration of the different dogmatic *loci* and methods of Calvin, with the goal to come nearer to a complete understanding of Calvin's theology. But we have to consider that the *summa*, the sum of these *loci*, doesn't produce the theology of Calvin. We do not actually know yet what are the basic ideas, the leading lines, or the starting point of Calvin's thought. Some decide that the *Institutes* are dogmatic; others—for example, Brian Armstrong—observe pastoral theology as its goal.⁶ I am, myself, of the second opinion. Ford Lewis Battles sought evidence that Calvin had presented a "true/false" principle and a complete fractioning off of ideas.⁷ But he found no one to agree with him in the Congress in Amsterdam in 1978. In my opinion, his thesis must be discussed further. Obviously, we have until today overlooked many important thoughts of Calvin; specifically, we have not yet made them clear.

I also ask when will we precisely grasp the juridical concepts of Calvin? I don't mean just his legal thinking, which is easily overemphasized. Rather, I mean his legal understanding of biblical terms. Mentioning this, I present another future project:

B. A Calvin Concept-Lexicon. I would like to explain further the juridical concept of biblical expressions. For example, is it not true that the word "testis" as used by Calvin is not the witness and preacher of the gospel but rather a truth statement as before a judge? This corresponds to the expressions "testimonium" or "consignare" (to seal), "scriba" (the clerk), etc. Overall it would be good for us to investigate each of Calvin's main concepts. It is a generally accepted mistake that later ideas—ideas of today—were also related to the original biblical concept or (even worse) that Calvin understood these concepts in their present-day sense. After four hundred years, "promisio" (promise) is understood as futuristic prophecy, whereas during the sixteenth century "promisio" was a present announcement. That is, it was an act of preaching. We could easily multiply the examples. In addition to the "foul grave" (as Kierkegaard says) of the four hundred years of the Reformation legacy, the special uniqueness of Calvin's thinking comes to mind. We have already discussed this.

Certainly many of Calvin's concepts have already been investigated; for example, the word "appendix" through H. Schützeichel⁸ or "brevitas et facilitas" through R. Gamble.⁹ The investigation of these concepts is the beginning of a Calvin-Lexicon.

C. Calvin as preacher, commentator, and letter-writer. The International Congress has usually given special attention to Calvin's different literary activities. Clearly the thought of Calvin presents a complex picture, whether we consider his theological text, his commentaries, his preaching, or his letters. We must go forward on this path before we can compose a picture of Calvin's uniqueness and make a full presentation.

The next step is to mention the *new edition* of all of Calvin's works. It was Ford Battles (with Peter De Klerk) who in 1976 brought to first expression the idea of an *Editio Secunda Corporis Reformatorem* (at the colloquium on Calvin and Calvin studies).¹⁰ The work of acquiring an *Editio Recognita Operum Calvinii* is, in the meantime, beginning, under the direction of the presidium of the International Calvin Congress. It should be mentioned that the problems and difficulties of a new edition cannot be fully discussed in detail now. The urgency of the work is undeniable. The *Corpus Reformatorem* printed the writings of Calvin without footnotes. This is very painfully noted with reference to Calvin's letters. With the *Opera Selecta* 2-5, we finally have a scientific edition. In addition to this there is the *Supplementa Calviniana* (presently five volumes) and a few separate editions of the

individual writings of Calvin. How shall Calvin the dogmatist, the preacher, the exegete, the polemicist, and the letter-writer be grasped and understood when the scholarly sources have not yet been scientifically edited?

Let me give you two examples: The Consensus Genevensis of 1552, which is under the title *De Predestinationae*, is written against Bolsec. The transcription is presented from the original. There is a second, against Phigijs, which is also from the original and still available. But Calvin fought a third foe, an Italian spiritualist, George Siculus, whose writing I have only found with great difficulty in London. There are only a few pieces of information concerning Siculus. That means that the opponents of Calvin are not all known nor are their writings available.

Furthermore, while commenting on this well-known and often reprinted writing (which numbers as one of the Reformed Confessions), I noticed that a section was published against the frequently noticed recommendation of the ministers of Basel, Bern, and Zürich in the Bolsec affair. It is known that Calvin was not happy with this good reference for Bolsec. But in this section we see Calvin express himself to the humanistic, that is, the Zwinglian-colored teaching on predestination among the German Swiss. We know how tense Calvin's relationship to them was when this passage is carefully understood.

I am certain that many new surprises are waiting for us when these texts are completely edited.

D. Themes of *Calvin's Biography* later came to the attention of the International Congress. Calvin's life needs further detailed research. Of course, there have been a number of shorter biographies of the Genevan Reformer in our time, but a large biography is still needed. That is, the deeper one penetrates into the theology of Calvin, the stronger would be the search for the impulses which came from the life of Calvin. On the other hand, through his correspondence, the spiritual movements and the political and social relationships come into play. The biographical and historical context of Calvin's theology should be researched in this way and should be drawn into this picture—completely apart from the basic work of a Calvin biography itself.

In the meantime, regional histories of France must also be pursued—I mean detailing and enlightening the history of the universities (of Paris, Orleans, and Bourges). The history of his family and a social history of the times must be enclosed within the biography of Calvin as well. The new edition of Calvin's correspondence, now underway, which means an exact commenting on the letters, will bring us closer to a new, large Calvin biography.

E. In closing, secondary helps to Calvin studies must also be addressed. Most important is the Calvin bibliography that Peter De Klerk has published yearly since 1972. It has, in a sense, become the official bibliography of the International Calvin Congress. It will also continue to appear as part of the work of the Meeter Center. We would hope that this work will some time soon be produced in one volume.

Also the concordance to the *Institutes* that had been established by F. L. Battles is not sufficiently used in Calvin studies. Its implementation in Calvin research should be made obligatory. Without this, examination of the *Institutes* can only be done with selections. But it is easily understood that all source material should be implemented and thereby the exact picture will come to light. The concordance is unfortunately in the

difficult form of microfilm, but R. F. Wevers of Grand Rapids will soon produce a new concordance on microfiche.

Wevers has also produced a *Concordance to the Latin Bible of John Calvin* in six volumes. Of course, there was no Latin Bible of John Calvin. This is a collection of the translations of Calvin's writings, especially in the commentaries, which is generally helpful. Sometimes it gives to one verse several divergent translations. Also a word index is at the end. Without question, Calvin translated the bible from his own theological perspective. It has not yet been investigated why he diverged from either the Vulgate or other contemporary Latin translations. New insights into his thought will emerge when we investigate why he translates Bible passages in different ways. So it would be good if we investigated, for example, whether or not he translates into the perfect tense rather than in the present the different Bible passages regarding his teaching on predestination. That means whether or not he finds in the biblical text a reference to the *decree of God* before the creation of the world (perfect) when God's creating work in Jesus' time and to all times (the present tense) is meant.

III. The Relevance of Calvin

The next question that needs to be presented is why Calvin is so attractive to scholars. Many researchers throughout the whole world turn to his works and study them, do their research, and make these long trips to discuss at Calvin Congresses. These expectations occur only with Luther and Calvin. One can note that readers are always fascinated with the teaching of justification and sanctification. One can also mention Calvin's teaching on the church and church offices that is still completely relevant today. Already Roman Catholic Calvin researchers are gladly occupied with this known piece of research. They cannot find sufficient information from Luther in this area.

Mentioning the exegete, one finds that when you first begin reading his commentaries, when you don't expect modern exegesis, you find spiritual knowledge. To this question there are, of course, many further answers. The phenomenon of the relevance of Calvin remains and is perceived around the world.

Notes

¹P. De Klerk, ed., *Renaissance, Reformation, Resurgence*. Papers and responses presented at the Colloquium on Calvin and Calvin studies held at Calvin Theological Seminary, Spiral bound, Grand Rapids, 1976.

P. De Klerk, ed., *Calvin and Christian Ethics*. Papers and responses presented at the Fifth Colloquium on Calvin and Calvin studies sponsored by the Calvin Studies Society, held at Calvin Theological Seminary, Spiral bound, Grand Rapids, 1985.

P. De Klerk, ed., *Calvin and the Holy Spirit*, Grand Rapids, 1989.

²*Calvinus Reformator*. His contribution to Theology, Church and Society, Potchefstroom, 1982.

John Calvin's Institutes: His Opus Magnum. Proceedings of the Second South African Congress for Calvin Research 1984, Potchefstroom 1986.

³J. Langhoff, J. Rogge (Hrsg.), *Immigration und Emigration—die calvinistische Einwanderung und Auswanderung in Mitteleuropa*, Beiträge des II. Kongresses für Calvinforschung in Mittel- und Osteuropa vom 24. bis 26. September 1984 in Berlin, Berlin 1985.

P. Karner (Hrsg.), *Die Schüler Calvins in der Diaspora*, Beiträge des 3. Kongresses für Calvinforschung in Mittel- und Osteuropa 1988 in Wien, Wien 1989 (Aktuelle Reihe des Reformierten Kirchenblattes Nr. 31).

⁴John H. Leith and Charles Raynal, eds., *Calvin Studies I, Calvin Studies II*. Papers presented at a Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson. Spiral bound.

John H. Leith, ed., *Calvin Studies III*. Papers presented at a Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson (Richmond, 1986).

John H. Leith, W. Stacy Johnson, eds., *Calvin Studies IV*. Presented at a Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson, 1986 (Richmond, 1988).

⁵Compare W. H. Neuser, "Theologie des Wortes-Schrift," Verheissung und Evangelium bei Calvin, in *Calvinus Theologus* (Neukirchen, 1976), 33-37.

⁶"The Nature and the Structure of Calvin's Thought according to the *Institutes*: Another Look," in *John Calvin's Institutes: His Opus Magnum*, Proceedings of the Second South African Congress for Calvin Research 1984, Potchefstroom, 1986, 55-81.

⁷"Calculus Fidei," in W. Neuser, ed., *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor* (Amsterdam, 1980), 85-110.

⁸Der Begriff 'appendix' in der Theologie Calvins und die Hierarchie der Wahrheiten; *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 94, 1985, 158-162. (Heft 2).

⁹WTJ 47, 1985, 1-17.

¹⁰"The Future of Calviniana" in P. De Klerk, ed., *Renaissance, Reformation and Resurgence* (see note), 133-181.

