

R. Ward Holder, *Calvin and the Christian Tradition: Scripture, Memory and the Western Mind*

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The orienting question of this study has to do with whether Calvin in fact subscribed to a strict differentiation between ‘scripture and tradition’, a binary that has haunted the wider perception of Calvin for centuries both among scholars and the public. Calvin, so one story goes, rejected ‘the tradition’ in order to join an effort to re-found the church and Christian teaching on the foundation of scripture alone. Certainly, as R. Ward Holder points out, Calvin’s polemical and doctrinal rhetoric can be harnessed to lend credence to this view. Yet, this book shows that closer attention to Calvin’s own argumentative practices undermines the story’s tempting simplicity.

Holder proposes two senses of ‘tradition’, both of which apply to practices that Calvin clearly embraced in his own work. One is etymological (Greek *paradidonai*, Latin *tradere*), understanding ‘tradition’ as an exercise of handing down a teaching. The other is practical and functions as a way to authorise one’s own theological production as a faithful representation of church teaching over time. The book shows that Calvin consistently engaged the tradition in precisely these ways. The book also argues that the ‘Western mind’ is characterised by confusion over tradition, retaining a complex array of ignored or underappreciated traditions and no guidance for how to engage them. It thus behooves readers to critically assess *what* our traditions are, and precisely *how* we are passing them down.

This book is an important and needed contribution to Calvin scholarship. Chapters 2–5 are especially valuable, giving a thick description of the way Calvin *actually* engages tradition in his commentaries, polemical writings, vernacular writings and doctrinal writings. There is no more powerful way to demonstrate the uselessness of a false binary (like ‘scripture versus tradition’) than turning to cases in which it cannot hold, and Holder executes this method with erudition. He shows, specifically, how Calvin consistently engaged traditional interlocutors in three ways: by using traditions to construct frameworks for his engagement with various groups, including fellow Protestants and Catholics; by engaging medieval and patristic traditions as a means to sanction his own interpretations; and by relying frequently on traditions to supply the very substance of his own theological investigations and doctrine. In these ways, Calvin avoided a vice that he named explicitly: that ‘immediately taking oneself ignorantly to the scriptures was a recipe for disaster’ (p. 75). He demonstrated instead that interpretation of scripture must take place within and across communities, both diachronic and synchronic.

Holder thus suggests that while Calvin did refuse to index ‘the tradition’ to a specific institutional hierarchy, he nevertheless asserted the continuing importance of tradition in four ways: as a historical record, as a witness to orthodoxy, as a transparent account of theological argumentation (rather than a bald assertion of authority) and as a practice that must be attached to the scriptures themselves. By working painstakingly through the various genres in which Calvin often inconsistently performed this distinctly reformist, scripturally-centred traditional engagement, Holder not only sustains his own argument. He also provides a clear and readable account of Calvin’s wider and

lesser-known writings with a skillful analysis of what they argue and how they are positioned. This will stand as a treasured resource for anyone interested in understanding Calvin's aims, strategies and audiences.

Finally, Holder frames the book (via the introduction, chapters 1 and 6, and epilogue) with some wider aims. Early on, he suggests that one characteristic of 'the Western mind' is a general confusion over tradition. Later, Holder takes Calvin to task for failing to supply readers with a solid theory for *how* to engage the tradition, citing Reformed theology's troubling record on matters of gender, sexuality, slavery and colonialism. Though he notes the promise of several recent attempts to give a clearer characterisation of the role of tradition and cultural context, he ultimately finds them lacking and calls for an explicit, foundational theory of Reformed interpretation. According to Holder, 'without a critical appraisal and method for passing on the tradition, and some manner of linking it to the scriptures, the likelihood of a changed future remains dim' (p. 288).

At times, I wondered whether the compelling and detailed evidence of chapters 2–5 demanded more nuance from the claims of the framing chapters. For instance, Holder deftly demonstrates the extent of Calvin's skill in deploying the tradition for persuasive purposes according to his respective audience – Catholic, Protestant, lay vernacular, university-educated, and so forth. The book also gestures to the fact that Calvin was a highly trained rhetorician, that Calvin saw the tradition as the technique of handing down the first-century gospel truth, and that Calvin saw the two marks of the true church as 'the Word of God rightly preached and heard' and 'the true administration of the sacraments' (p. 200). Yet the book also minimises the significance of rhetoric and of the performative marks of the church that Calvin himself offers. Rather than suggesting that they may sufficiently serve as Calvin's own key entry points for recognising and navigating tradition, the book suggests that Calvin sought a further 'safe' and 'secure and immovable foundation for his thought and his church' (pp. 203, 255). I wonder whether a chapter on early modern humanism, and particularly the impact of Quintilian's rhetoric, might have deepened our understanding of the persuasive dimensions of Calvin's chosen invocations of traditional figures. I also wondered whether thinking more deeply about the performativity of Calvin's two marks – right preaching and sacramental administration – might have provided a more consistent logic for how one ought to both recognise and receive interpretations of scripture that are neither individual or absolute, but materialised in various locations of gathered believers submitted to a consistent set of practices, contemporary or historical. Perhaps there is something like a rule to be found here, though one that could not properly be called 'foundational'. It would be a rule that is attached to a practice as its animating center.

Holder, in fact, concludes with a call to practice: '[W]e have the possibility of learning from these moments and coming to a better understanding of the traditions that we receive and are handing on to later generations. In doing so, we can begin to create practices for receiving them critically, whether in concert with the scripture in theological circles' (p. 255). While wondering whether Calvin might in fact have more to offer on the question of practice, I could not agree more with this final gesture.

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