

# Calvin less strict than thought

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The prevailing view of Calvin as a rigid, authoritarian figure should possibly be adjusted, says Dutch researcher Ernst van den Hemel. Although Calvin in his magnum opus *Institutes* formulates theses in a strict and decisive manner, he contradicts himself at other places in the book. This literary dynamic cannot be viewed independently of his theology, says Van den Hemel.

On the one hand, Calvin is known as an unswerving theologian and on the other as an ornate writer and a 'prince of the Renaissance', especially in France. Van den Hemel, a researcher in literature studies at the University of Amsterdam, was surprised by the highly imaginative French in which Calvin wrote the *Institutes*, and so he decided to investigate how the two identities of the theologian come together in his magnum opus.

## Fundamentalist

Calvin is frequently described as a systematic thinker. This view plays a role in both the theological and political interpretations of his work. Consequently, the man from whom Calvinism takes its name is often considered a fundamentalist. According to Van den Hemel, however, one of the most important aspects of fundamentalism – strict adherence to certain principles – is not evident in the book. From a literary perspective, the text is even dynamic at certain important moments. In his work, Calvin continually undermines any sense of certainty. This reveals that, when writing his work, Calvin's priority was not so much a systematic presentation of his views, but rather adopting a literary form

to challenge his readers' perspective. Van den Hemel contends that this literary dimension of Calvin's theology is related to the content of the book, in which mankind is warned not to place too much faith in his own capabilities.

One example of the dynamic in Calvin's work is his explanation of the existence of an innate knowledge of God. In his Institutes, published in 1559, Calvin first of all postulates that an innate knowledge of God does indeed exist, and then he undermines this point of view: 'But though experience testifies that a seed of religion is divinely sown in all, scarcely one in a hundred is found who cherishes it in his heart, and not one in whom it grows to maturity so far is it from yielding fruit in its season.' With this Calvin challenges his readers and forces them to think for themselves. The believer who is confident in his own faith is reprimanded. This way the text itself resists a fundamentalist interpretation.

Van den Hemel calls for more early modern works to be studied from a literary viewpoint to realise a new approach to historical texts. He is not interested in whether or not a text is religious, but whether it makes a dynamic interpretation possible as opposed to it providing an irrefutable foundation. Such an approach could contribute to historiography and to defining the roots of important terms such as secularism, fundamentalism and the cultural impact of Calvinism in the Netherlands.

Ernst van den Hemel carried out his research with funding from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. He received his doctorate on 5 July 2011 from the University of Amsterdam.

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