INTRODUCTION:
REVISITING CALVIN: ANALYSIS, ASSESSMENT, AND RECESSION

Henk van den Belt

John Calvin has exercised a tremendous influence and his theology has played an important part in the development of the Christian tradition. The commemoration of the 500th Calvin anniversary in 2009 offered an opportunity to revisit his theological heritage during the 8th conference of the International Reformed Theological Institute (IRTI). The conference was held in France, and hosted by the Free Faculty of Reformed Theology, now called ‘Faculté Jean Calvin,’ in Aix-en-Provence. The aim of the conference was to look back at Calvin’s theology from the perspectives of current Christianity and the Reformed tradition in particular and trace his influence in the different contexts of the approximately hundred participants, scholars and students from all over the world.

Paul Wells, from Aix-en-Provence, opened the conference with an analysis of Calvin’s paradoxical legacy. A remark by this lecturer—that Calvin was a “scarecrow” because of his character and his polemics—found its way to a headline in the Dutch *Reformed Daily.*¹ This volume shows that much more can be said about his influence and legacy in and outside of France.

There are at least three ways to revisit Calvin. In the first place one can turn to the sources and analyze Calvin’s theology, either by closely reading the Reformer or by studying his sources. A different approach pays more attention to the present context and returns to Calvin’s theology from that perspective; revisiting Calvin then means assessing his theological heritage in order to apply that to contemporary theological issues. Finally, one can also carefully listen to how others have understood the Reformer. We are not the first readers of his theology and the way others have understood and interpreted him can offer new insights into our own understanding and to the application of his heritage for our own context. The contributions to this volume all fit into one of these categories, although in some of them more than one perspective is chosen.

¹ “In Frankrijk werd Calvijn een ‘vogelverschrikker’” [In France, Calvin became a ‘scarecrow’], *Reformatorisch dagblad* 7 July 2009.
The Visitation of Christ

The early Lutheran and Reformed churches replaced the hierarchical structure of the regional church by a system of church visitation, the first one initiated by Luther and Melanchthon in the electorate of Saxony in 1527. Also, from Geneva regular church visitations were conducted in the surrounding villages as a way of monitoring the evangelical character of the region, for which Geneva functioned as a model. This practice expressed the mutual responsibility of the evangelical churches. ‘Revisiting Calvin’ is in some respects similar to a church visitation of the historical roots of the Reformed tradition, with the question in mind as to how the spiritual life of early modern Christianity can still be inspiring today.

Calvin does not use the verb *revisitare* in his works, but he knew the verb *visitare* from his Latin Bible. Commenting on Christ’s true humanity in the *Institutes*, he turns to Psalm 8:4 where *visitare* has the meaning of remembering. “What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visitest him?” Discussing Christ’s descent into hell a few chapters later in the *Institutes*, Calvin claims that the power of Christ’s death is so great that he penetrated even to the dead; “godly souls enjoyed the present sight of that visitation which they had anxiously awaited.” Apparently, the essence of Old Testament faith is waiting for God, or more specifically waiting the visitation of God in Christ. Although those who died in this expectation did not obtain their desire, they received a glance of Christ’s victorious death. Regardless of the truth in that claim, Calvin’s explanation is a nice example of his understanding of the unity of the Old and New Testaments. However, it also shows that the incarnation of Christ is the core of the gospel. He became as weak and frail as all the

---

4 Psalm 8:4. Calvin, Institutes II.13.2. For references to Calvin’s Institutes only the numbers of the book, chapter, and paragraph are given throughout this volume. Unless a different translation is mentioned, all direct quotes are from John T. McNeil (ed.), Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960). A reference to the Opera Selecta is added only if the Latin is important.
5 Calvin, Institutes II.16.9. In chapter 8 of the present volume, Johan Buitendag examines Calvin’s interpretation of this part of the Apostolic Creed and claims that it reveals influence from Plato’s dualism.