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Calvin and the Spiritual Classics: Lessons for Congregational Leaders

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Background of SRTM Project

The Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry Project (SRTM) is a project aimed at serving congregational leaders who are bivocational and/or working in rural or urban poverty by providing them with a theological education. Having begun in 2019, SRTM seeks to equip eight hundred congregational leaders with theological resources and deepened ministerial friendships. This will be achieved through structured mentoring and cohort development, as well as the formation of a curriculum made up of “spiritual classics.” SRTM defines “spiritual classic” as “a writing that is clearly attributable to a follower of the Lord, focuses on a biblical understanding of sanctification, and a multitude of voices across Church history attest to its value for Christian living” (Porter).

A.W. Tozer once pointed out that the reason he stayed passionate for God was because of the influence his teachers had on him (Voss). However, these “teachers” were not his pastor or a spiritual mentor in his life. Rather, they were the authors of some thirty-five spiritual classics which he read and allowed to shape his life. In the same way, one of the goals of SRTM is to create a way for congregational leaders to learn from prominent Christian leaders and thinkers from centuries past through interaction with their works.

Historical Context

John Calvin was a major player in the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation has four major historical circumstances which led to its conception:

(1) The decline of the Holy Roman Empire caused the emergence of modern nation-states. These new city-states filled the political vacuum left by the intensifying conflicts between the church and the state and, thus, disrupted the church-state unity that existed.

(2) The authority of the pope became questioned on two historical occasions. On the first occasion, the pope was exiled to Avignon in what would become known as the Babylonian Captivity. On the second, the Great Schism, multiple people claimed to be the pope, causing distress and disorder within the church.

(3) The evolution of universities had an effect on how theology was discussed. Scholasticism was a movement that caused reason to be applied to all data of revelation. New Learning was another which sparked a revival of searching letters and ancient texts, and stemmed from the Renaissance.

(4) Monasticism had a meaningful impact towards the onset of the Reformation because it caused the Reformers to be well-versed in the medieval spiritual leaders.

Purpose

Today’s society is undergoing a dramatic shift from a modern world to a postmodern one. Similarly, as discussed in the Historical Context, the Protestant Reformation was a time of great change and turbulence in Europe which had great economic, political and sociocultural implications. Thus, Christians in the world today have something to learn from our spiritual ancestors from five hundred years ago. By studying how they dealt with the changes of their world, Christians today can begin to derive principles by which to handle the drastic changes in the world.

The purpose of this specific research is to seek answers to the following questions: what spiritual classics did John Calvin read? How did Calvin use these spiritual classics for his own spiritual development? What spiritual classics did Calvin deem worthy enough to prescribe to others to read? How did Calvin instruct others in incorporating those spiritual classics into a curriculum of discipleship?

Spiritual Classics Used by Calvin in *Institutes*

John Calvin references 117 authors of spiritual classics in his most prominent work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Nineteen of those 117 authors are referenced twenty-five times or more. These authors include:

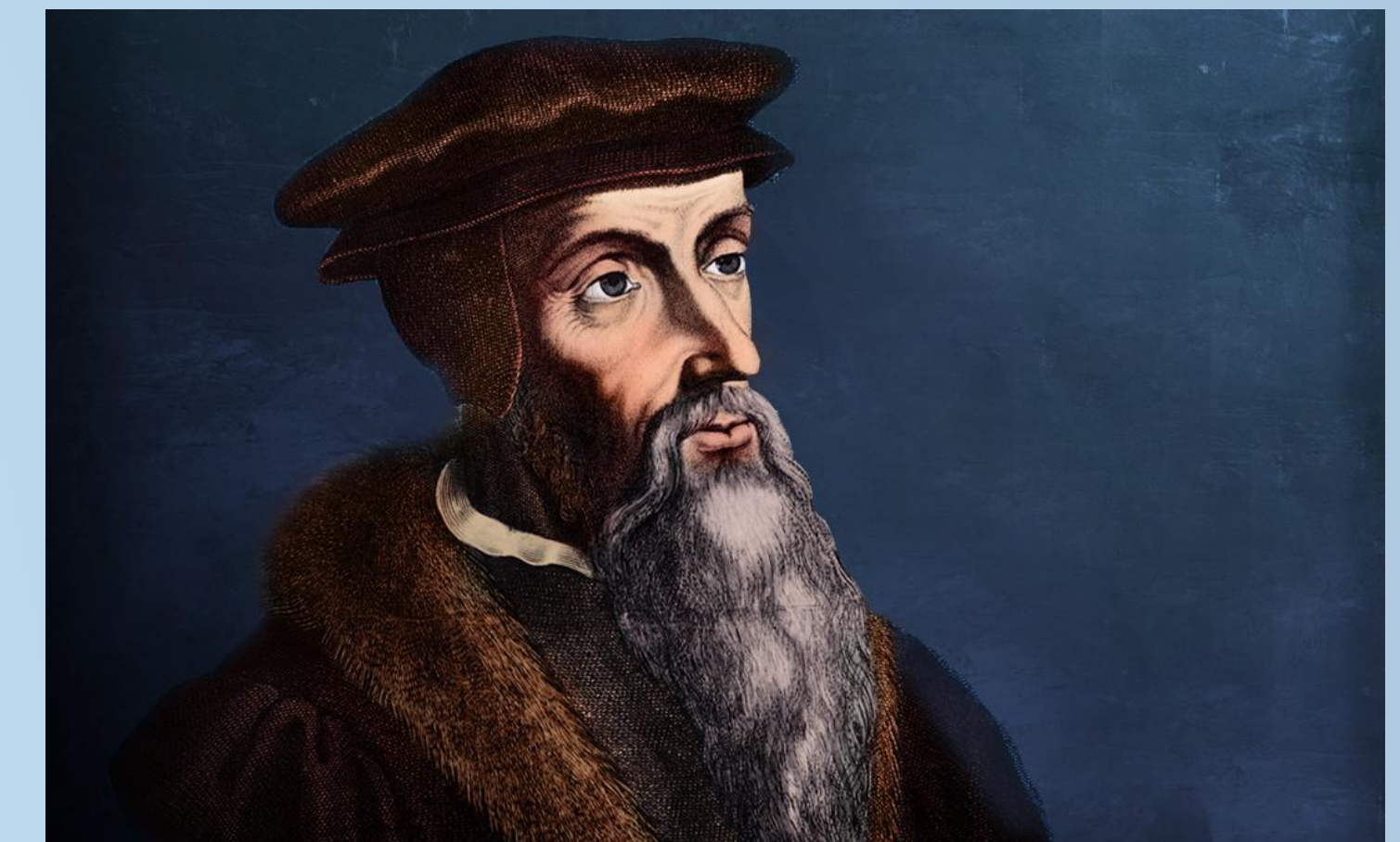
- Ambrose (27 references, 11 works)
- Augustine (788 references, 60 works)
- Bernard of Clairvaux (50 references, 12 works)
- Martin Bucer (39 references, 4 works)
- John Chrysostom (40 references, 21 works)
- Cyprian (69 references, 6 works)
- Desiderius Erasmus (47 references, 9 works)
- Pope Gregory I (93 references, 5 works)
- Jerome (41 references, 12 works)
- Pope Leo I (37 references, 2 works)
- Peter Lombard (114 references, 1 work)
- Martin Luther (117 references, 45 works)
- Philip Melancthon (60 references, 7 works)
- Osiander (29 references, 4 works)
- Michael Servetus (79 references, 4 works)
- Tertullian (49 references, 15 works)
- Thomas Aquinas (145 references, 7 works)
- Peter Martyr Vermigli (542 references, 1 work)
- Huldrych Zwingli (44 references, 12 works)

Future Research

- The list of works referenced in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* may be analyzed in order to reveal any patterns of Calvin’s reading habits
- Calvin’s other writings may be read to find any places where he instructs others in reading spiritual classics
- Biographical research may be done on how Calvin regularly read the spiritual classics
- Calvin’s pastoral works may be investigated to see how he may have incorporated spiritual classics into discipleship

Preliminary Findings

- It is made clear by this evidence that Calvin was heavily invested in studying the works of a broad range of authors, but specifically the twenty-five listed above
- The exhaustive list of authors which Calvin cites in *Institutes* shows that he read not only older spiritual classics or only those of his contemporaries, but that he read spiritual classics written by both his spiritual ancestors and his contemporaries
- Calvin did not develop his theological views and insights out of nothing, but rather was educated by the writings of at least 117 spiritual teachers before him who gave him a sturdy starting point



Annotated Bibliography

Davis, Dr. Don L. and Dr. Hank Voss, editors. *The Evangelical Handbook: A Guide to the ABCs of Equipping Urban Church Planters*. The Urban Ministry Institute, 2015. This work identifies that A.W. Tozer referred to the authors of the spiritual classics he read as his teachers.

George, Timothy. “The Reformation Tradition.” *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics: A Guide for Evangelicals*, edited by Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, InterVarsity, 2013, 247-271. This chapter gives the historical and theological context for the Protestant Reformation and then breaks the Reformation down further, illustrating how multiple reformations were occurring within the time period known historically as the Reformation. The author of this chapter, Timothy George, is the founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University. He has done extensive study of the Reformation, engaging with both Catholics and Protestants. Additionally, he is the executive editor for *Christianity Today*. He is a very reliable source regarding all things Reformation.

Greef, Wulfert de. *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*. Translated by Lyle D. Bierma, Baker, 1993. This work provides an overview of the life of John Calvin, as well as an introduction to several of his more prominent works. The author, Wulfert de Greef, is the leader of an organization in the Netherlands which promotes the study of the Reformation, making him a credible source on the historical context of Calvin and on his works.

McNeill, John T., editor. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Westminster, 1960. This is John Calvin’s most influential work. Using this work, a list has been compiled of all of the spiritual classics that Calvin referenced in it. The number of occurrences of each author was noted, as well as the number of occurrences of each individual spiritual classic written by that author.

Porter, Steve. “Why Should We Read the Spiritual Classics?” *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics: A Guide for Evangelicals*, edited by Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, InterVarsity, 2013, 15-30. This chapter contains the definition for a spiritual classic used by SRTM. The author of this chapter, Steve Porter, is an associate professor of theology and philosophy at Talbot School of Theology and Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University. He is interested in spiritual formation and has contributed to many scholarly journals, including serving as the managing editor for the *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*. This makes him a highly credible source on the topic of spiritual classics.