

# John Calvin: Christian Humanist and Evangelical Reformer

By John W. de Gruchy

*Reviewed by Jason Garoncy, Southern Presbytery*

**J**ohn de Gruchy's little book on John Calvin is a great read! One of its real achievements is that its author has succeeded, in a little over 200 pages, in capturing something of Calvin's spirit and energy.

It is certainly no hagiography – de Gruchy is not shy to point out those areas where paradox exists in his subject, and where he thinks that the reformer simply got it wrong! In an honest effort to introduce one of the most important figures in Western intellectual, theological and social history, the book picks up some themes that marked and gave anatomy to Calvin's work.

De Gruchy is especially keen to retrieve Calvin and the tradition that exists most consciously in his wake as constructive expressions of Christian humanism, a movement of social transformation that is at once liberating, ecumenical and humanising.

Writing with a non-technical style, and out of his own experience of witnessing both the beauty and the ugliness of the reformed project played out in his native South Africa, de Gruchy builds a compelling case for why we should take Calvin's thought seriously. De Gruchy believes Calvin's thought can be used as a resource for what it means today to engage in the public commons, and for encouraging the kind of flourishing of human society that God desires.

Certainly not everything in Calvin's thought lends itself to such a project, but there is much that does, and these are the features that de Gruchy identifies and develops. He concludes his study by offering six affirmations about Christian humanism and its public vision. They bear repeating and thinking about as a way into considering Calvin's own vision and its portability today. They are:

**First**, Christian humanism is inclusive in its vision of humanity. It recognises that being human is our primary identity – coming before those of religion, race, culture, social class or gender.

**Second**, Christian humanism affirms both the God-given dignity of being human and the concomitant responsibility of being human. Given human brokenness, it understands the gospel as God's way of restoring human dignity and awakening our responsibility for the world in which we live.

**Third**, Christian humanism is open to knowledge and insight from wherever truth is to be found, but it draws most deeply from the Christian Scriptures and the long history of their interpretation through the centuries, embodied in what is called Christian tradition.

**Fourth**, Christian humanism insists that love of God is inseparable from love for others; that faith and discipleship belong together; that theology and ethics are part of the same enterprise, and that the renewal of church life and public life are intrinsically connected.

**Fifth**, Christian humanism places justice, good governance, ecological responsibility and global well-being above national and sectional interests. It is concerned to ensure that scientific and technological development serve the common good and the well-being of the earth.

**Sixth**, Christian humanism encourages human creativity and cherishes beauty. It insists that goodness, truth and beauty are inseparable, though distinct. Just as it places a premium on moral values and the search for truth, it also regards the development of aesthetic values and sensitivity through the arts as essential for human well-being.

I warmly and enthusiastically commend this book, particularly for those for whom Calvin remains something of a persona non grata, or an embarrassing (or worse!) spokesperson for the Christian faith, and for those who wish to gain a clearer sense of the world-embracing vision of the reformed project at its best.

John W. de Gruchy, *John Calvin: Christian Humanist and Evangelical Reformer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013) ISBN: 978-1-62032-773-9. 240pp.