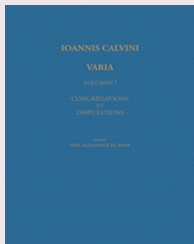


# Calvin's inspiring theological workshops

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Calvin's inspiring theological workshops

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Erik Alexander de Boer is Professor at the Theologische Universiteit in Kampen, the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam and the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. In his latest book he edits and comments on sources found in the *Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire de Genève*. These sources document the *Congrégations et disputations*, the institutionalised weekly assemblies of the Genevan pastors which took place 'late in Calvin's life when his position was one of absolute eminence ...' (p. xvi). De Boer's book examines the 32 available transcripts which reflect some parts of these weekly assemblies. This edition is the sister volume of De Boer's monograph *The Genevan school of the prophets: The congrégations of the company of pastors and its influence on 16th century Europe*, 2012, Librairie Droz, Genève.

De Boer's new publication points out that these assemblies, held every Friday from 1549 to 1564 under the moderation of John Calvin, were, beside Calvin's lectures and sermons, a third means of his oral exposition of the Holy Scripture. The surviving transcripts report a small part of these assemblies which were, according to De Boer, a try-out platform by which Calvin involved the Genevan pastors in his lifelong project of writing commentaries. Beyond that, these assemblies were both a field of teaching and learning as well as a homiletical training session which aimed to inspire the pastors' preaching for the following Sunday.

De Boer's general introduction to his book and his specific introductions to each source are written in English while the various sources are edited in their original languages. The book is in four parts: Parts I to III are edited in Old French which was spoken in Calvin's days, and Part IV is edited in Latin.

The transcripts begin with Part I, the *Exposition*, which deals with the Epistle of St. Jude. After this, Part II presents transcripts referring to St. John, the topic of predestination, a harmony of the last four books of Moses, the epistle to the Galatians, Joshua, and to Isaiah. These weekly *Congrégations* elucidated biblical texts and let them speak to reformation times. For example, if God promises to Joshua never to leave him, the words of the *congrégations* apply this promise to the reformation church: '... *Et que comme il a esté de tout temps protecteur de son Eglise, qu'encores aujourdhuy il nous veut estre pere ...*' (p. 218). The *congrégations*, therefore, confirm that God promises to remain patiently with the believers of his church; the God who in earlier times never let Joshua fall will never let his church fall.

In Part III, *Catéchisme*, De Boer points out Calvin's aim to provide guidance regarding the pastors' catechetical tasks. The *Catéchisme*, therefore, reflects the catechetical concerns which have been discussed in the same way in the Friday assemblies. Besides the *Exposition*, the *lectio continua* of the *congrégations*, and this *Catéchisme*, the sources refer in Part IV also to the *Disputations* which took place '*apres disner*' (in the afternoon), when the pastors 'trained themselves in theology, preferring to speak Latin among each other' (p. 429). One of these documented *Disputations*, for example deals with the divine nature of Christ; this specific short *Disputation* concludes with the words: '*Ergo Christus natura Deus est*' (p. 449).

The merit of De Boer's publication is that it reflects the spirit of the Genevan *Congrégations et disputations* and makes their contents accessible for interested readers. His introductory explanations throw light on the history of the Reformation in the environment of Calvin's work in sixteenth-century Geneva. De Boer points out the important function of the weekly pastors' assemblies within Calvin's master plan and within the Genevan Reformation movement as a whole. Even if the *Congrégations et disputations* are closely interrelated to Calvin's lectures, commentaries and sermons, the documents of the *congrégations* are distinct from the other forms. They witness Calvin's intention of consolidating the reformation doctrine by the means of these weekly training sessions for the Genevan pastors. These assemblies ensured the conservation of the pure reformed doctrine.

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In this book De Boer again proves his high qualification as an expert regarding Calvin and the Genevan Reformation. Moreover, he achieves his aim of awakening insight and empathy among scholars, pastors and interested readers for these inspiring theological workshops of the Genevan Reformation movement. Proficiency in French and Latin will make it possible for the reader to go beyond De Boer's informative introductions and obtain immediate access to the spirit of these *Congrégations et disputations*, and hereby to a vital line of reformed theology. The old French is easily understandable for French speaking readers.

This book is certainly relevant to the needs of today's ministers. Preachers would be wise to learn from these sixteenth-century experiences. De Boer's publication inspires us to recognise the value of such theological workshops in our own times. Similar learning platforms would increase both the theological knowledge and the spiritual inspiration that is necessary in order to be ready to preach the gospel in our modern world. The reviewer, therefore, recommends De Boer's critical edition of the transcripts of the *Congrégations et disputations* to all pastors, scholars, and wider audiences interested in inspiring sources of 16th century reformed theology.