



# Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin

*Randall C. Zachman*

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In his groundbreaking new study of the Swiss reformer, Randall C. Zachman reveals and analyzes John Calvin's understanding of image and word both comprehensively and chronologically, with attention to the way that each theme develops in Calvin's theology.

For most scholars, John Calvin (1509-1564) insisted on the essential invisibility of God in order to deny that God could be represented in any kind of visible image. This claim formed one of his foundational arguments against the display of man-made images in worship. Given the transcendence of God, Calvin rejected the human attempt to create signs and symbols of God's presence on earth, especially the statues, images, and paintings present in Roman Catholic churches.

Zachman argues, in contrast, that although Calvin rejects the use of what he calls "dead images" in worship, he does so to focus our attention on the "living images of God" in which the invisible God becomes somewhat visible. Calvin insists that these images cannot rightly be contemplated without the Word of God to clarify their meaning; we are only led to the true knowledge of God when we hold together the living images of God that we see with the Word of God that we hear. This combination of seeing and hearing pervades Calvin's theology, from his understanding of the self-revelation of God the Creator to his development of the self-manifestation of God the Redeemer in Jesus Christ. According to Zachman, Calvin maintains the same linking of seeing and hearing in our relationships with other human beings: we must always hold together what we see in others' gestures and actions with what we hear in their words, so that the hidden thoughts of their hearts might be manifested to us.


Zachman's nuanced argument that Calvin holds image and word, manifestation and proclamation, in an inseparable relationship is relevant to all the major themes of Calvin's theology. It constitutes a highly significant and surprising contribution to our knowledge of the Reformation and an invitation to further study of theological aesthetics.

"Randall C. Zachman's *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* may well become the standard introduction to the theology of John Calvin. Better than any book I know, Zachman makes sense of Calvin's work and methods while capturing Calvin's religious sensibilities in a way no other does. This may be the book that finally demolishes an older image of Calvin that much of the Calvin scholarship has been chipping away at for the last thirty years. Zachman's fresh reading of Calvin makes a true scholarly contribution that could well shape Calvin studies--and broader late medieval and early modern studies that bump into Calvin--for the next generation." --**Thomas J. Davis, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis**

"With this impressive study Randall Zachman has established himself as one of the foremost Calvin scholars in the world. His earlier works--*The Assurance of Faith* (a study of conscience in Luther and Calvin), and *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor and Theologian*--were substantial contributions to Calvin studies, but this large volume is the capstone of many years of immersing himself in the Calvinian corpus. Developing two

major motifs of the living images of God the Creator and God the Redeemer, the author treats a wide variety of themes in Calvin's theology in a fresh and creative way. This is a monumental accomplishment. Written in a lively, lucid manner, this work should be of interest not only to Calvin scholars but also to a more general readership." --**I. John Hesselink, emeritus, Western Theological Seminary**

"Most students of John Calvin concentrate on his use of words and make of his form of religion one that can be absorbed only by listening or reading. Randall Zachman, by examining closely Calvin's constant references to living images, suggests that Calvin created a form of religion that should be absorbed by both listening and looking, revealed in both truth and beauty. His book supplies a fresh view that will be of special interest to those seeking ecumenical perspectives on Calvin's important contributions to the Christian tradition." --**Robert M. Kingdon, Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison**

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