

“If you’re not a Calvinist, this book is for you; and if you are a Calvinist, this book is for you. Down to earth, often funny, and with a keen knack for illustration, Medders makes plain what biblical Calvinism—humble Calvinism—looks like in everyday life.”

**DONALD S. WHITNEY**, Author, *Praying the Bible*

“Laugh-out-loud Reformed theology. This is a book for our sectarian times: a delightful cornucopia of sprightly prose, fresh insights, and heartfelt self-examination. At times I found myself guffawing through the funny-bone pain of his all-too-accurate descriptions of the company of the Reformed.”

**KEVIN J. VANHOOZER**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Jeff speaks straight to the elephant in the echo chamber, showing himself to be the chief of prideful Calvinists and charting his subsequent journey toward humble Calvinism. Beautiful writing with rich theology.”

**LORE FERGUSON WILBERT**, Author, *Handle With Care*

“Calvinists should be humble and happy. It’s sadly not always the case, and ‘Young, Restless and Reformed’ has too often become ‘Proud, Aggressive and Tiresome.’ Medders has done us all—and me in particular—a very great service in providing some necessary correction and some great encouragement.”

**ADRIAN REYNOLDS**, Associate National Director, FIEC UK

“Reformed culture seems to be known for its harshness and lack of grace. Yet Reformed soteriology should create a joyful heart and a deep, glad humility that overflows into compassionate evangelism and graciousness to all. I hope Jeff’s book will be used by God to renew a spirit of gentleness and humility among us, and will encourage those who have rejected these beautiful beliefs to consider them anew.”

**MATT CHANDLER**, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas; President, Acts 29; Author, *Take Heart*

“Too often, we allow our personal theological perspectives to divide us when God calls for unity. I’m thankful for this call for empathy, understanding, and humility. Regardless of whether your theology is Reformed or not, I hope you’ll process the principles from this book and put them into action.”

**CALEB KALTENBACH**, Author, *Messy Grace*

“I knew the ins and outs of Calvinism well before I understood the ins and outs of God’s grace, which is an insane thing to write—but also why Jeff’s book is so valuable. I likely would have been too arrogant to appreciate it then, but, looking back, it is exactly the message I desperately needed as a young Reformed guy. I’m so grateful this book is available now, and I pray it will save some other cocksure Calvinist from themselves.”

**BARNABAS PIPER**, Podcaster; Author, *The Pastor’s Kid*

“Read this if you are a Calvinist. Read it if you don’t understand Calvinism. Read it if you dislike Calvinism! I am certain you’ll be encouraged, and you might even be pleasantly surprised. Both timely and helpful, from the first page to the last this refreshing book encouraged me to delight in Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”

**STEVE TIMMIS**, CEO, Acts 29; Author, *Total Church*

“A great book on how to be robustly Reformed and savor the doctrines of grace without being a jerk about it. I wish I had read this book when I was in seminary. It is about how theological knowledge and Christ-like love go together; and if they don’t, then you’re doing it wrong.”

**MICHAEL F. BIRD**, Lecturer in Theology, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

“Maybe in another generation the term ‘humble Calvinism’ won’t seem like such an oxymoron. If so, this encouraging and challenging book will have been used by God to help us live up to what we believe.”

**COLLIN HANSEN**, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; Author, *Young, Restless, and Reformed*

“I am a truer Calvinist and a happier Christian having read this book. Like a physician, Jeff carefully diagnosed pride in areas that I did not know existed and then prescribed the only cure—the glorious gospel of grace.”

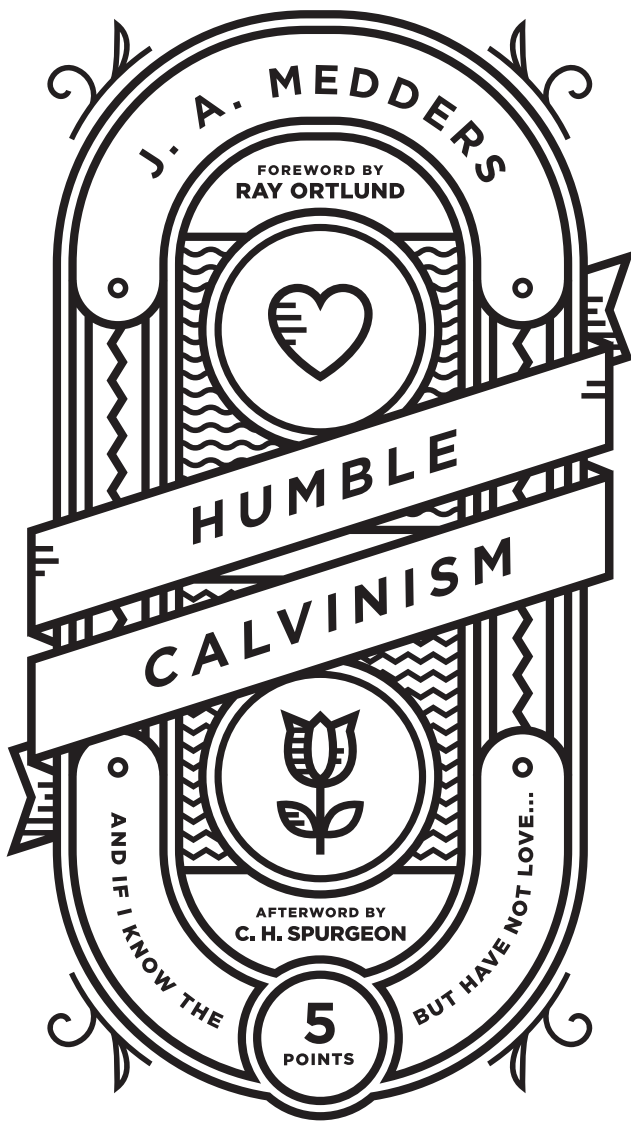
**MATT BOSWELL**, Hymnwriter; Pastor, The Trails Church, Celina, Texas

“This wonderful book serves as a wake-up call for that part of us that tends to be more doctrinaire than doctrinal, with a knowledge that puffs up instead of a love that builds up. An excellent—not to mention refreshing—way forward.”

**SCOTT SAULS**, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *Befriend*

“Experience isn’t the best teacher. Someone else’s experience is. You learn the same lesson without paying the same price. I’m grateful for Jeff’s book for this reason. He charts a course through the landmines of Calvinism with the shrewdness (and sympathy) of someone who’s recklessly walked the path and lost a few limbs in the process, leading us to a deep love and humility.”

**JOHN ONWUCHEKWA**, Pastor, Cornerstone Church, Atlanta



Humble Calvinism

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*To my brothers and sisters in Acts 29 churches  
all around the world.*

*May we be humble and happy Calvinists.*



# FOREWORD

## BY RAY ORTLUND

Calvinism is exciting. As a way of gaining new insights into the Bible, as a God-centered way of seeing all of reality, Calvinism is exciting. The God of Calvin, Owen, Edwards, Spurgeon, Machen, Lloyd-Jones, Schaeffer and many others, the God of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the 1689 Baptist Confession—the glorious God envisioned by these thinkers and displayed through these documents is compelling to more and more Christians today. “Reformed” theology has made a big comeback. It’s a good time to be a Calvinist.

The sad part is, we corrupt everything we touch. That too is a teaching of Calvinism, and we sure are proving it. Let’s all admit the complication we too often introduce. It works like this. The very fact that Calvinism is intellectually satisfying, and even thrilling, can make us

feel superior to other Christians who don't "get it" yet. Then we Calvinists become oblivious to how annoying we are in attempting to spread our beliefs to others who are unconvinced. Glorious theology, conveyed through an immature personality, ends up seeming inglorious and even distasteful.

A humble Arminian can be a good Christian. But a proud Calvinist cannot be a good Christian or a good Calvinist. One of the clearest messages from one end of the Bible to the other is summed up like this: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4 v 6). Any theology that is technically accurate but personally self-exalting does harm not only to people but also to that very theology. Above all, in relishing the fine points of theological debate we can lose sight of Jesus himself, without our even realizing it. Then we Calvinists leave behind us a trail of destruction in our churches and families and friendships. In this respect, we Calvinists might be the ones who don't "get it" yet.

But the fault is not in Reformed theology itself. That theology, so true to the Bible and honoring to the Lord, is in fact a wonderfully humbling power. It puts us down on our faces before the Lord, where we are happy, winsome, and fruitful. And that is how *Humble Calvinism* by Pastor Jeff Medders can help us all.

This book needed to be written, to guide us into the very humility that Calvinism should create. If God is big and we are small, if God's power jump-starts us without our

help, if the only contribution we make to our salvation is the evil that makes salvation relevant to begin with, if it is God's eternal purpose alone that will sustain us all the way, if our Christianity is all according to Scripture and not our brainstorms, all of grace and not our merits, all by faith and not by demands, all thanks to Christ and no thanks to us, all for the glory of God alone—where does our self-exaltation fit into that picture? On the other hand, a heart at rest in our gracious Lord of glory, a heart at peace with other Christians who disagree with us—*that* is the heart of a true Calvinist.

John Newton, the eighteenth-century Calvinist composer of “Amazing Grace,” wisely wrote to a younger pastor, “Of all people who engage in controversy, we, who are called Calvinists, are most expressly bound by our own principles to the exercise of gentleness and moderation.”

Jeff understands and embodies that. He himself has taken the journey that many of us are on—a journey from the child's play of theological arrogance to the sweetly humbled faith that true Calvinism calls for. Jeff has been led by grace into the green pastures and beside the still waters of true Calvinism, and this book can help us all to get there and stay there, in that place where the Lord himself is wonderfully present.

As a Calvinist, I rejoice in these striking evidences of God's favor on our generation—The Gospel Coalition, Together For The Gospel, the Acts 29 church-planting network, Reformed hip-hop and poetry, for starters.

Now may the Lord add, as the crowning beauty upon us all, humility, gentleness, kindness, and restraint, with a relaxed, cheerful enjoyment of one another. The modern rediscovery of Reformed theology, rather than leaving people cold, could then grow into historic revival, for the glory of God alone.

*Ray Ortlund, Immanuel Church, Nashville*

*December 2018*



## 1. THE PROBLEM WITH CALVINISM



**W**hat do you think is Calvinism's biggest weakness? I don't think it's the doctrines, or the points, or Calvin himself.

I think it's Calvinists like me.

Let's pretend God gives you a vision of heaven, lasting around ninety minutes or so.<sup>1</sup> You don't see unicorns or find out who shot JFK, but you see Jesus—and he's thrilled to see you. He takes you on a tour of his Father's house and the many rooms he promised to prepare for his brothers and sisters.

You walk by one wing of the Father's house. It's noisy, with lots of clapping and loud singing. Towering 20-foot-tall

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<sup>1</sup> Not how you imagined a book on Calvinism would begin? Me neither, but hang in there. It is pretend, after all.

double doors are open, and you and fellow saints redeemed by the blood of the Lamb wave and greet each other as you walk past. You ask Jesus, “What’s going on in there?”

And Jesus tells you, “My charismatic family is having a little get-together.”

“Ah,” you say as you look back at them. “They seem like fun.” Jesus nods.

The Lord leads you down another wing. This one is librarian-approved quiet. You hear a few laughs, but they’re reserved ones. There’s singing, but again, no one would accuse them of breaking any noise ordinances. Those towering doors? Open here too. You wave and greet brothers and sisters in Christ. The Anglicans, Methodists, and even some Baptists are meeting in this wing.

Twelve minutes left in your vision. Jesus takes you quickly through one more wing. Those doors? Closed. Jesus even begins to tiptoe down the hall, so, of course, you imitate him.

Jesus gives you the universal sign—index finger over the lips—to be quiet as you go. But you can’t help yourself. “Jesus, why are the gigantic doors closed, and why are we being so quiet? Who’s in there?”

“Well,” the Lord explains, “the Calvinists are in there, and they think they are the only ones here. I’d hate to spoil it for them.”

Now, this story is complete make-believe (you knew that, right?), and a very poor illustration of the perfect unity and fellowship we'll have in heaven—but it does highlight a problem with Calvinism. The problem is not Calvinism. It's Calvinists.

Here is the truth—my central thesis, if you like, and the starting point for this book. Many of us who love to love the “doctrines of grace” have not grown in showing grace. We have not become more gracious, kind, tender, and compassionate. And that can only mean one thing: we actually don't know the doctrines of grace. Sure, we know the points and can rehearse the arguments and even recall verses to support the five petals of our TULIP.<sup>2</sup> But an arrogant and argumentative Calvinist is just a Pharisee with a fresh coat of paint.

## HOW CALVINISM FED MY IDOLS

I have a past. And I'm not proud of it. It's not my past before I became a Christian; it's my past *after* I became a Calvinist. For years, I carried around a Calvinism in which Jesus was, for the most part, ignored. My Calvinism was filled with data, puffed-up-ness, systematically arranged verses, talking points, arguments, anger, and quotes from Puritans. And sadly, I know I'm not alone.

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2 Two pages in, and we've already had a decent amount of jargon—Calvinists, charismatic, TULIP... and there's some more to come. So if you want a brief explanation, turn ahead to page 31, where you'll find a brief interlude, and then just turn back to here. Feel free—it'll all still be here when you get back.