

# The Work of Our Hands

## Reframing the Reformer: A New Portrait of John Calvin

*Kelly Rider*

---

The idea was to portray Calvin as the pastor and the person he must have been—perhaps a kinder, gentler version of the man we might be familiar with, but with a sense of tradition he helped shape.

---



“I offer you my heart,  
Lord, readily and sincerely.”

*Kelly Rider is a book and paper artist who has taught art to children and adults in New Mexico, Chicago, and, most recently, California, where she lives with her family. Visit [www.kellyrider.com](http://www.kellyrider.com) to see more of her work.*



From sketch to sketch

It would not be completely accurate to say that I come from a long line of Presbyterians, but perhaps it would be better to say that my family is *thick* with Presbyterians. And when I say *thick* I mean it in the best sense of the word—full, because there are a lot of us—at least going back a few generations.

My grandfather on my mother's side used to make a joke to explain the number of his offspring, "No, we're not Catholic, just passionate Presbyterians." Chuckle, chuckle. Ha. That was my grandpa—a Presbyterian missionary doctor who loved a good laugh, his wife, and his nine children—and a loving, lively bunch we remain.

The joke for the next two generations would be slightly different—something to explain "another Presbyterian minister marrying into the family" from one of my aunts, or "surviving as a preacher's kid," as one of my cousins might tell it, or just the amazing small-world connections that exist in something like a denominational church when



Gouache ground on handmade paper



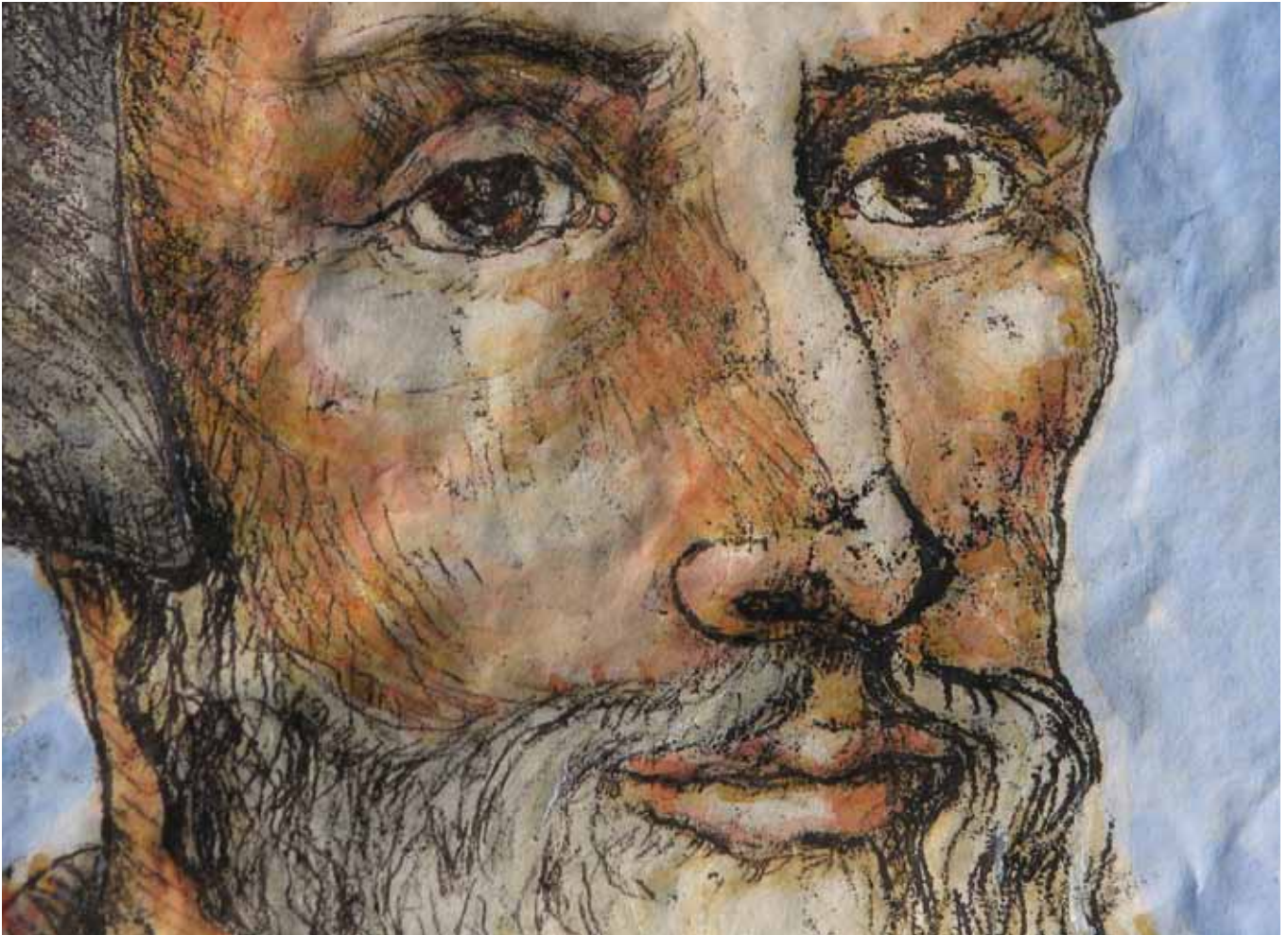
First phase ink, "traced monotype"

any of us realize we know someone in common through our church communities. I grew up with the story of how my parents met as teenagers in their Presbyterian church in Denver, Colorado, and from both sides of the family came more stories of mission and work trips, youth group escapades, and the ever-present joys and challenges that involvement in church life brings. My extended family, with its sturdy Presbyterian roots, is the bedrock of my life and faith, and in too many ways to count they have helped shape the person and artist I have become. Although I didn't get tempted into ministry or long-term missionary work or seminary, I've always had a place in my heart for beautiful liturgical art, or art that expresses the deepest places of the spirit and soul, and seeks to honor God in its making. This is why when the latest art project came my way, I felt as if my shoulder were being tapped, if gently, to tell me it was my turn this time.

---

A friend thoughtfully offered me the project of creating a new portrait of John Calvin in honor of his life and 500 years of Reformed faith for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

---



*The eyes are the window*

A friend thoughtfully offered me the project of creating a new portrait of John Calvin in honor of his life and 500 years of Reformed faith for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ([www.pcusa.org/calvinjubilée/index.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/calvinjubilée/index.htm)). The idea was to portray Calvin as the pastor and the person he must have been based on some of his writings—perhaps a kinder, gentler version of the man than we might be familiar with, but with a sense of the tradition he helped shape. I gladly accepted the offer and began to do my homework.

Many of the existing portraits of Calvin were painted after his lifetime and show a severe and craggy countenance, usually a profile or three-quarter view. I found an interesting book on the subject titled *John Calvin: A 16th Century Portrait*, by William Bouwsma, that featured a rare portrait of the young Calvin looking directly at the viewer, a man almost unrecognizable from his later self. Skimming through Bouwsma's book, I refreshed

my hazy high school history class memories of Calvin's theology, and though admittedly some of his views might be troubling to a contemporary sensibility, I couldn't help but be moved by the drive of his thinking as a Christian Reformer, and the evident earnest heart of the man. I started sketching, doing my best to combine aspects of the painted, drawn, and printed Calvin portraits I had access to, knowing that the features of the *real* man might be found in there somewhere.

The process of creating this piece was challenging, and like any artwork it involved a series of choices along the way as to approach and technique, composition and color. But what was especially difficult was the *portrait* part of the portrait—how to get it right, how to do this figure justice and convey a more sympathetic yet still strong and dignified version of him. My original idea was to use the words from Calvin's writings to make up his face or to weave them into the artwork



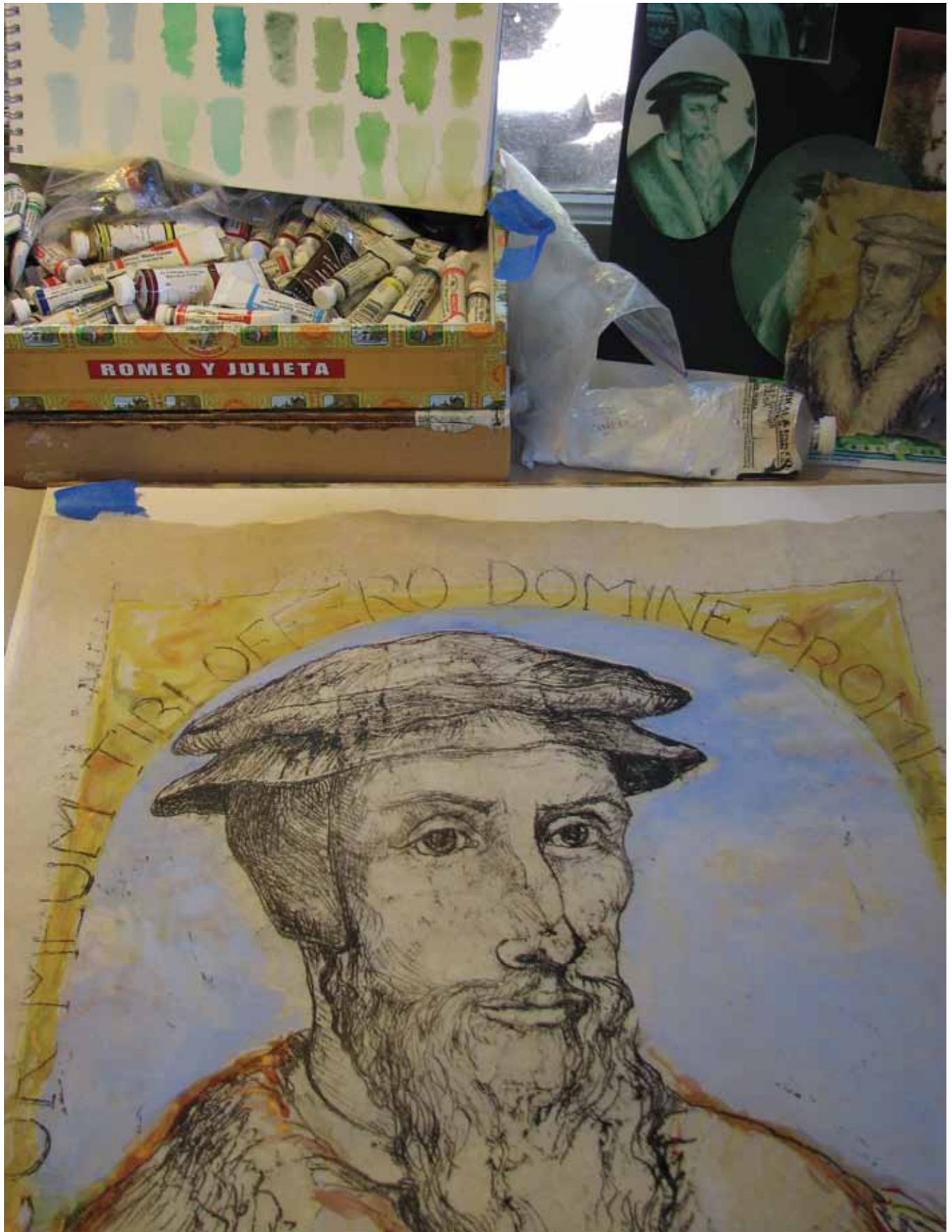
*Drawing on reverse side*

so that they would become part of him and surround him. In the end it was simpler to choose Calvin's favorite Latin motto as a kind of frame for his face and an indication of the architecture that he was a part of building and breaking through. The motto reads: COR MEUM TIBI OFFERO DOMINE PROMPTE ET SINCERE, "I offer you my heart, Lord, readily and sincerely."

From the first, I knew I wanted to use rich and expressive colors for the picture, and to set Calvin's head against an arched backdrop and sky, hearkening back to traditional portraits of his time. For the motto, I imagined a kind of handwritten inscription, not quite set in stone, with a slightly irregular feel, to get across a sense of personal conviction rather than perfection. The color and texture of the paper was important, so I chose a piece of flax paper that I made by hand a number of years ago, just right for suggesting a certain age. Beginning with careful pencil renderings of



*Hand detail*





*Second phase ink*

Calvin's face, I paid special attention to a forward gaze—wanting to see into his eyes and to show him looking out. After the pencil, I washed in areas of opaque gouache paint on the reverse side of the paper, making a ground for the torso in ink that would follow. After inking up a Plexiglas plate with oil-based etching ink, I laid the paper on the plate with the painted side down, then “traced” over my drawing to pick up lines of ink on the front of the paper. This “traced monotype” technique creates a beautiful fuzzy line and adds a wonderful measure of unpredictability to the artwork. The second phase of inking included using rubber rollers, or brayers, to add touches of ink to Calvin's cloak,

Bible, and beard, and finishing off the motto with the tracing technique. Finally, when the ink dried, more gouache and watercolor were applied to flesh out the figure and his clothes. My aim was to use color and line freely to get across a fresh sense of vision, and from that forward-looking gaze, to find where Calvin's meets our own.

If I learned a little more about John Calvin during this process it is that he was like all of us, human and flawed, but with a heart that yearned for good. So for my beloved Presbyterian family, those living and the ones who have gone before, this one's for you.

---

So for my beloved Presbyterian family, those living  
and those who have gone before, this one's for you.

---



*Morning light, finished portrait*

*Editor's Note: "Calvin Looks Forward," by Kelly Rider, was commissioned by the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and is available in a suitable-for-framing 22"x28" poster, commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of John Calvin's birth and the church's celebration of the Calvin Jubilee (1509-2009). Available for \$12.95 online at [www.pcusa.org/marketplace](http://www.pcusa.org/marketplace), item 2116209004, or by calling (800) 524-2612.*