

Reflections on *Readings in Calvin's Theology*

(Donald K. McKim, ed., Wipf & Stock, 1998)

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Submitted on July 21, 2014, for CH 8.101 Calvin & Reformation of Life

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Introductory Comments

The intention herein is to demonstrate my engagement with the text. I have selected a majority of the chapters/essays upon which to comment. My only regret is the inability to discuss these insightful essays with my cohorts. I read this text after reading Calvin's *Institutes*. More than once, these essays have called my attention to things I had missed or misunderstood. I am particularly impressed by chapter 17, "John Calvin: A Theologian for an Age of Limits" by Donald K. McKim, as it touches on topics that I hope to include in my dissertation research.

Chapter 1: "John Calvin: Doctor Ecclesiae" by John T. McNeill

I used to consider the Bible to be verbally inerrant, a position I now consider untenable. I'm glad to see Calvin agrees, pointing out how Paul and the other apostles often quote Scripture freely (from memory?), not worrying about exact wording (14).

McNeill draws out from the *Institutes* other concepts that I also found interesting: all truth is God's truth (14), the church is bigger than any institution (15), Calvin never intended to start a new church (15), the church is "a community of forgiveness" (16), and, the one I found so disagreeable, that "unjust rulers are to be obeyed" (18).

Chapter 2: "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity" by Ford Lewis Battles

As a teacher, I find it fascinating that "[t]he organizing principle of the *Institutes* is...primarily pedagogical" (33). Accommodation, I believe, is crucial to good pedagogy. Although teachers are no longer formally trained in rhetoric—to their loss—the "gulf between the highly educated and the comparatively unlearned" (22) is one that cannot be bridged solely through intuition. That God bridges the gap between Creator and creation via creation itself, including the enscripturated Word and the incarnated Word, is a provocative parallel to the teacher's role *in*

loco parentis (23). Battles summarizes Origen by saying that in the search for truth we should be less concerned about “names and words” and “more anxious about the fact signified” (27). Origen’s actual words are that we grasp these facts “through simple apprehension” (27). Nowadays we might call that experiential or hands-on learning—something that is at the core of my educational philosophy.

Chapter 3: “Calvin’s View of Scripture” by Donald K. McKim

I’m glad to be reminded of Calvin’s background in humanism. I grew up thinking that was a bad word, but during my time away from Christianity I studied humanism—I even joined the American Humanists Association—and came to appreciate its emphasis on experiential (not necessarily empirical) reality. If nothing else, just like studying the humanities (a contentious category today), it widens one’s scope of the world, of others’ perspectives. As McKim describes, the influence is seen in Calvin’s emphasis on textual context and authorial intent over etymology or atomism (48-49).

Chapter 4: “Calvin on Universal and Particular Providence” by Charles B.

Partee

Calvin’s “chief interest is to assert God’s particular providence” (69). Calvin scholars who have focused on common grace (like Kuyper, Bavinck, Van Til et al. (71n9)) are given to “expand, schematize, and *distort* Calvin’s cautious remarks on the closely related topics of...common grace” (71, emphasis in original). “Calvin does not develop a ‘world view’ in which the doctrine of universal providence could be isolated and treated as the presupposition of an anthropology, epistemology, or apologetics” (75). These are bold statements backed by more quotes and footnotes than I am able to either confirm or deny, but perhaps they’re not so earth-shaking as they sound. To the best of my knowledge, Kuyper, Van Til, Dooyeweerd et al. never called Calvin a philosopher; they merely built their philosophical ideas on his biblical exegesis. As Partee says in his conclusion, “Calvin is not concerned with an abstract defense of the notion of the sovereignty of God and therefore not with a theoretical construction of its extent or its application” (87). Calvin may not be a philosopher but one can draw philosophical conclusions from his “cautious remarks on...common grace.”

Chapter 5: “Calvin on the Covenant” by M. Eugene Osterhaven

“Christ cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament; the Old Testament cannot be understood, in its true sense, apart from Him” (104). To the first half of that statement I respond: of course, *christos/mashiach* is an Old Testament concept. To the second half: it depends on your point of view. My short tenure (nearly two years) with a Jewish community (as their cantor/songleader) and concurrent Jewish studies taught me many valuable lessons about Judaism and its view of Scripture: mainly there is neither a monolithic “Judaism” nor a single, authoritative interpretation (or even hermeneutics) for the Hebrew Scriptures. (Truth be told, the same could be said about Christianity, but that’s a separate issue.) There are instead countless historical and modern schools of interpretation and practical application, all more or less authoritative within their own circles. Messiahs, throughout history, are a dime a dozen. The “true sense” of the “Old Testament” is an interpretational one, a midrashic exercise, which finds myriad conclusions in Jewish, Christian, and other religious traditions.

Chapter 6: “The Mirror of God’s Goodness” by Brian A. Gerrish

Gerrish’s proposal is that Calvin understands the *imago Dei* in terms of *both* human nature *and* “the manner in which [man] orients himself to God” (115), not just the former. In other words, our reflection of God is found not only in structure but also direction (cf. A. Wolters). I think this relationality (relativity)—to God, to others, to all of creation—is not just an aspect or part of, but integral to being human, to being part of creation, to *being* itself.

Chapter 7: “The Incarnation: Christ’s Union with Us” by Paul van Buren

“...Calvin understands the sinlessness of Christ primarily as obedience. The difference between Christ and ourselves is that the feelings or passions of the soul that are rebellious in us are in Christ obedient to the will of God” (135). And Jesus, in the garden, asking for the “cup” to be taken away: was that being obedient to God’s will? I struggle to understand Jesus’ dual nature, but I’m not alone. “If Calvin’s Christology reveals problems, they are problems that he has inherited from the history of Christian dogma...” (141).

Chapter 8: “The Atonement: Sacrifice and Penalty” by Robert S. Paul

Here’s what I don’t understand: in the Psalms and prophets you find resounding voices *against* sacrifice and *for* mercy, love, justice, etc. Admittedly, there are opposite voices as well (so much for the Bible speaking univocally). The progressive element seems to be outgrowing those ancient (pagan-based) rituals—and then God makes a bloody sacrifice of his Son? I don’t deny the necessity of sacrifice. It’s a natural truth: some must die so that others may live (from stars to humans). But I fear that our traditional theological understanding of Jesus’ sacrifice, the messianic sacrifice, has been too narrowly defined.

Chapter 9: “Justification and Predestination in Calvin” by François Wendel

As I mentioned in my Calvin journal (cf. “23 Days with Calvin”), the concept of predestination is consilient between Calvinists and “hard” materialists, but in both cases, too much focus on it can lead to an erosion of personal responsibility, something neither camp desires. As Wendel points out, “...to recognize that Calvin taught double predestination, and underlined its dogmatic and practical interest, is not to say that this must be taken to the very center of his teaching” (161) as his critics often do. However to say that “we have no right to inquire into [the] effects [of reprobation]” in the here and now, but must wait for the “life beyond” (178) is intellectual cowardice. We must be willing to look our doctrines in the face and see if they truly reflect our knowledge and experience of God. If not, it’s back to the drawing board.

Chapter 10: “Christ, the Law, and the Christian” by I. John Hesselink

“For Calvin there is nothing worse than trying to live the Christian life without definite, revealed norms or rules” (181). I have to smile; I, too, am an organizational nut; everything must have its proper place. But there’s nothing unnatural about that, in or out of Scripture. Nature itself is nothing if not rule-bound and rather harsh on those who try to ignore those rules. It’s the fabric of creation and, as Dooyeweerd so clearly delineates, every modal sphere has its laws/norms. Nonetheless, situation ethics also has its place, even if such situationalists don’t recognize their own (hidden, assumed) norms. In situations where “the right thing to do” is unclear, it’s important to put our heads together and lay our norms out on the table for all to see.

Chapter 11: “True Piety According to Calvin” by Ford Lewis Battles

My favorite line from this essay: “One cannot really understand a particular Christian’s view of discipleship”—or anything, I would add—“apart from his times and apart from his own distinctive *experience* of Christ” (204, my emphasis). It reminds me of the Jewish story that however many Israelites stood before God at Mount Sinai, that’s how many different experiences of God there were—which is meant to explain why Jews (like Christians?) are always arguing amongst themselves. “Calvin’s conversion,” says Battles, “took a lifetime to be worked out” (198). Isn’t that how it is for everyone? Perhaps not. Perhaps some people have a one-step “I’m in” experience, or, as I used to say when people asked me *when* I became a Christian, “God chose me before the foundations of the earth”; however, to go deeper, to grow in spiritual maturity, is, I now believe, a life-long conversion experience—or growth in piety. Piety. An antiquated word. In figure 11.1 Battles attempts to summarize Calvin’s “definitions of *pietas* and *religio*” (193), but I have a difficult time understanding piety apart from religion, and (in the chart) worshipping apart from serving God.

Chapter 12: “Calvin and the Church” by G. S. M. Walker

I consider myself a capital-E Ecumenical Christian, so it is encouraging to read that Calvin “envisaged a really ecumenical council, over which the pope would be welcome to preside on condition that he accepted the authority of Scripture” (230). I had also never considered the fact that Anglicanism and Lutheranism are usually nationally defined, whereas Calvinism usually transcends national boundaries (although, admittedly, Dutch Reformed churches have been fairly insular) (229). I have also long known and been inspired by the fact that Calvin (with the help of Louis Bourgeois) created his own metrical psalm hymnal based on the “popular folk-music” (228) of his day. I have tried to find and create songs of quality in that vein throughout my lifetime as a religious songleader.

Chapter 15: “Calvin and Civil Government” by John T. McNeill

and Chapter 16: “Church and Society” by W. Fred Graham

“It is difficult,” writes Graham, “...to abstain from imposing modern ideas upon the Reformer...” (284)—something, I am chagrined to admit, of which I am guilty (cf. the conclusion of my “23 Days with Calvin”). It is indeed heartening to know that I was at least partly wrong

and overly hasty to accuse Calvin of giving too much respect to corrupt leaders when, as McNeill writes, “the young scholar [Calvin] ventured...boldly to admonish the proud and absolute monarch [Francis I] of a great nation” (262). Calvin holds political leaders (magistrates, kings) to a sense of sacred ministry (265). He may also require of us more obedience than I’m prepared to give, but then most of the authorities of my daily life are not living by “the perpetual law of love” (266). Besides, as McNeill points out, “...we create a wholly false impression of Calvin’s political ideas if we give sole attention to his exhortations to obedience” (268). OK, I’m guilty. As McNeill concludes, referring to Calvin’s concerns with the “rights of man,” elections, and weighing regulation against liberty, “from these presuppositions he reached certain viewpoints that have leavened political theory in modern liberal states” (274).

Chapter 17: “John Calvin: A Theologian for an Age of Limits” by Donald K. McKim

As a “dark green” (ecofriendly) Christian, I was surprised and delighted by McKim’s essay. Written in 1983, the opening paragraph, beginning with the words “In the last decade,” is a litany of “crises”—food, oil, energy, economic issues (291)—that continues to plague us three decades later. The public mind has yet to comprehend “the limits of the world’s resources” (292). McKim briefly describes “contemporary Christians” that are working toward “energy controls” and “simpler lifestyles” (292), something that was far more prevalent—across the religious spectrum—in the 1970s and early ‘80s than it is today. Sadly, the loudest Christian voices today are pro-oil (“Drill, Baby, drill”) and climate change deniers (*Sojourners* magazine is a notable exception).

In a discussion of Calvin’s *via media*, McKim quotes Ford Lewis Battles’s *Calculus Fidei* in which Battles compares mathematics and Scripture, saying they “both view the human grasp of reality as increasingly approximated to, but never identified with, the human symbols we use to represent reality” (294). In other words, our search for true knowledge (ideally, hopefully) brings us ever closer to reality but can never equate it in its fullness due to the limits of our (symbolic, lingual) ways of knowing. “In this life,” McKim says, “...we can never arrive at complete truth” (294). In a sense, Battles (1978) and McKim (1983) are early postmodernists, at least with respect to epistemology. Modernism promises verifiable truth; Calvin et al. set limits, reminding us of our epistemological humility.

Chapter 18: “Eschatology and History” by David E. Holwerda

I’m glad to see I’m not alone in asking if Calvin’s ideas (in this case, eschatology) are “more Greek than biblical” (315). Holwerda says Calvin “modified the Platonic doctrine” (315) of the immortality of the soul, yet his “anthropology is inclined toward a basic dichotomy between body and soul, earth and heaven” (317). Such dichotomies have always bothered me; I’m not sure why. I think my intuition has been that such separations go too far. I’m looking for a more holistic, integral perspective (which I believe is tucked away in the pre-Hellenized Hebrew mindset).