

CALVINUS REFORMATOR: His Contribution to Theology, Church and Society

Reviewed by the Editor

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Here is a competent, comprehensive - albeit, at times, technical - survey of contemporary Calvin research which will be invaluable to students of Church History and Historical Theology. All the chapters were originally papers read and discussed at the South African Congress for the Advancement of Research on Calvin in 1980, a Congress which was originally conceived of at the International Congress on Calvin Research held in Amsterdam, September 1978.

An absorbing, introductory chapter by Professor W.H.Neuser of West Germany provides details of international Calvin research. He reports that Calvin and Luther research "are currently experiencing astonishing momentum and enormous expansion. Great interest in this research is being manifested today throughout the world by ecclesiastical and academic circles" (p1), although Prof. Neuser argues there is more need to catch up in Calvin rather than in Luther research. Only two centres of Calvin research exist, namely, in Strassburg and in Grand Rapids and while individual scholars throughout the world are researching on Calvin, there is an urgent need to co-ordinate this research. Some immediate tasks include a new edition of the Complete Works of Calvin, a satisfactory presentation of Calvin's theology and more detailed attention to his sermons.

The chapters immediately following touch on the following subjects: Research on Calvin and its influence in the field of Afrikaans theology, Research on and influence of Calvin in the English-speaking ecclesiastical sphere (J.A.B.Holland), Calvin research at Calvin (C.J. Vos), The Editio Princeps of the Institutio Christianae Religionis 1536 and then a brief characteristic of Calvin's theology (Prof. Potgieter). In the latter chapter, Professor Potgieter writes: "It is indisputable that Calvin accepted the apostle's pronouncement (2 Tim 3:16) unconditionally. With respect to his conception of deity, there can be no doubt that it was that of the triune God, which is basic to his Institutes" (p41). His conclusion is that "the most appropriate term to characterise the theology of Calvin would be: TRINITARIAN - with all that implies as to revealed truth as well as

to the unfathomable counsel of the LIVING God, who "so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life", and whose Spirit lives in the faithful as in his temple. This means that Calvin gave us a theology permeated by the "UNIO...MYSTICA", about which he waxes so eloquent: "What the mind has imbibed (must) be poured into the heart" (p47).

Chapter seven is entitled, 'Calvin and the Theological Trends of his Time' and here Dr Balke of the Netherlands identifies the theological trends within and without the reformatory movement as: ROMANISM: "nearer Scholasticism, Mysticism, devotio moderna and biblical Humanism: REFORMATION: including Luther, Melancton, Zwingli and Buser; RADICALISM: nearer Anabaptism, Libertinism and Anti-Trinitarianism" (p50).

Chapters eight and nine deal with aspects of Calvin's philosophical background then the relation between the Renaissance and Reformation ("Contemporaries but not Allies")

Professor P.E.Hughes then provides a useful account of Jacques Lefèvre D'Etaples (c.1455-1536), Calvin's forerunner in France. At the age of 25, Calvin journeyed to S.W.France to meet and confer with this old man who predicted of Calvin "that he would be a distinguished instrument in the restoration of the kingdom of heaven in France! Today, Lefèvre and his worth are 'being rediscovered'. He had a firm grasp of the doctrine of justification by faith alone with the consequence that all the glory must be ascribed to God alone. William Forel (1489-1565), for example, says that Lefèvre was the human instrument God used to 'bring him to trust in Christ as his sole Saviour and Mediator' (p103). One of the major tasks of Lefèvre was to rescue the LITERAL sense of the Scriptures as opposed to the allegorical method of interpretation so common at the time. The literal sense was the INTENDED sense and Lefèvre insisted that the proper literal sense was the sense intended by the Holy Spirit. But this sense was missed if the Holy Spirit was not present with regenerative power in the heart and mind of the reader or student of the Bible. Lefèvre then postulated a two-fold literal sense: (1) 'the improper sense of those who are blind and fail to see, and who therefore understand divine things only in a carnal manner' and (2) 'the proper sense of those who see and are enlightened'. This former sense is 'fabricated by human reason; the latter is imparted by the divine Spirit'" (p100). Incidentally, Lefèvre wrote a short exposition of the Psalms on the basis of these hermeneutical principles and his 1509 edition was found in the library

of Dresden with its margins profusely annotated in Luther's handwriting.

In chapter eleven, Professor D'Assonville compares John Knox's doctrine of the Word of God with that of Calvin. Some general principles are then elucidated. For example, the great merit in Knox's work is the fact that he upholds the authority of the Holy Scriptures unconditionally just like Calvin. However, the difference between Knox's and Calvin's views in the Institutes came to the fore clearly where the substantive view of the Scriptures is concerned. The principle: The Bible is the Word of God, receives a formal application in Knox because he takes his basic premise from Deut.12:32. Their views also differ in their version of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. To Calvin there is no essential difference between the two testaments but in the mode of administration. In Knox these differences are in the background so that the relationship between the testaments is one of identity. Again, Knox takes little cognisance of the historical development of Ecclesiastical history with its Christocentric character which in turn had a one-sided effect on his preaching (p126).

'Calvin as a Spiritual Theologian' is briefly considered in the next chapter under three aspects: (1) his thorough knowledge of the Bible (2) his views on the Bible and, finally, his application of the Bible. It is refreshing to find competent Calvin scholars like Dr Potgieter affirming Calvin's unconditional acceptance of the divine inspiration of the Bible. The following six chapters are basic and stimulating. Themes such as Calvin's view of man (Gen.2:15), Calvin's hermeneutics, the scopus of the Scriptures, the problem of the concept of 'personality' of the Holy Spirit are dealt with helpfully. The final chapters are restricted in their appeal but two chapters at least should be read, namely, 'Calvin and the Protestant Hymns' then Professor J.B. Torrance's 'Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland - Some basic concepts in the development of Federal Theology'.

Undoubtedly here is an indispensable reference book for those seriously studying the life and theology of John Calvin.

The Editor apologises that, due to lack of space, two of his other articles have had to be held back until the next issue, namely, 'The New Hermeneutic (Part 2)' and 'Review of Theological Journals'.