

Reformed Christianity is a major stream of the world Christian movement. Most of Protestantism, with the exception of Lutheranism and the Anabaptists, has branched off from Calvinism, even if in forms most Calvinists would disapprove. An historical understanding of Calvinism is therefore vitally important if we are to understand Christianity in the present.

If there is one book among all that I mention that you should read it is *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed* by Philip Benedict.¹ Subtitled 'A Social History of Calvinism', this book is an account of the emergence and development of what has become known as Calvinism in the 16th and 17th centuries. Philip Benedict is not a church historian as such and indeed not a Christian. In the preface he mentions that he is an agnostic Jew who, unlike John McNeill who wrote an earlier history of Calvinism, is not writing from within the tradition. However he writes with remarkable insight and sensitivity to both the spiritual life of the Reformed churches and the doctrinal issues they faced. Benedict is a professor of history at Brown University in Rhode Island and a leading authority on the Huguenots. The book is elegantly and clearly written and reads easily. It is a joy to read such a book. In addition to its massive scholarship, one of the strengths of the book is its sensitivity to the human dimension of the Calvinist movement. There are numerous anecdotes and vignettes of ordinary people seeking to live out their faith in often very difficult circumstances. Unlike many historians Benedict takes seriously the faith commitment of many of the leading figures. For example, dealing with the Calvinism of many of the princes in the German Palatinate he recounts how many of them had become convinced Calvinists at university in Switzerland or Holland or England and that their

motivation in trying to reform the churches in their principalities was genuinely spiritual and not primarily political.

The book is divided into four main sections. In the first Benedict examines the formation of the Reformed tradition within Protestantism. Beginning with the differences between Martin Luther and Carlstadt, Benedict discusses the formative influences of Zwingli, Bullinger, à Lasco and Calvin. By 1555 the emerging Reformed movement had experienced, in Benedict's words, a 'modest but strategic expansion', but in the decades to follow the movement experienced an explosion of growth. That is the theme of the second section, 'The Expansion of a Tradition'. What is significant about this growth was that initially at least it was not imposed by the magistrate, but rather emerged from below as groups of Christians met together for Bible study. Benedict argues that Calvinism was more adaptable than Lutheranism to local circumstances and became a more clearly defined alternative to Roman Catholicism. In this section Benedict explores the development of Calvinism in France, Scotland, The Netherlands, the Holy Roman Empire, England, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania. Benedict is understandably excellent on France, but his treatment of Eastern Europe is particularly illuminating. What is interesting is the way that the movement adapted to the different political, cultural and social contexts in which it spread.

In the third section, 'The Transformation of a Tradition', Benedict examines the theological disputes in the Age of Orthodoxy with particular emphasis on the disputes surrounding the doctrine of predestination, the role of the Sabbath in British Calvinism, the development of scholastic theology,

Puritan practical divinity, covenant theology and the rise of rationalism. Calvinism in this period cannot be understood without reference to its political context. The change of the religion of the ruling prince affected the fortunes of Calvinism, especially in states where it was dependent on his favour for its establishment. In the Palatinate the picture was very confusing as a Calvinist father might give way to a Lutheran son or a Catholic relation and the religion of the state changed accordingly. Benedict has a whole chapter devoted to the problems of British Calvinism from the early Stuarts to the Restoration and the recognition of Protestant pluralism. The fourth and final section, 'New Calvinist Men and Women', looks at what Calvinism meant to ordinary people. Contrary to what some might think Calvinism was not simply a system of religion imposed on reluctant populaces, but was often a popular movement. In this section Benedict focuses on three areas: the ministry of pastors, elders, deacons and teachers, church discipline and the practice of piety. The latter chapter on piety is particularly illuminating if all too brief as Benedict examines how Calvinism sank deep roots in human lives and communities through corporate worship, family religion, catechizing, and the nurture of the godly life.

The conclusion is the most disappointing section of the book as Benedict reflects on the impact of Calvinism on the modern world. Understandably as a 'secular' historian he does not have a confessional interest in Calvinism and while admitting its obvious significance for those who are that is not his concern. But in looking at the impact of Calvinism on western society he questions, as have a number of recent historians, how much Calvinism as such contributed to the advance of science or the

development of capitalism and liberal democracy. In the end he seems to think that Calvinism's greatest legacy to contemporary society is its history of resistance to tyranny and the abuse of power. But in spite of its somewhat downbeat ending I wholeheartedly recommend this book. It is not perfect. Readers may have reservations about how Benedict handles some of the doctrinal developments. Possibly the book is not as much a social history of Calvinism as it claims to be. Considering its scope Benedict is stronger in some areas than in others. But who is capable of mastering all the languages and history required to deal in consistent depth with such a diverse movement as Calvinism? No, all Calvinists should be thankful to Philip Benedict for his achievement in writing such an excellent book that captures something of the remarkable movement that Calvinism was and continues to be.

Several of Benedict's articles on French Protestantism are brought together in *The Faith and Fortunes of France's Huguenots, 1600-1650*.² These articles deal with a fascinating variety of subjects that together offer a glimpse into the world of French Protestantism in the period between the end of the Wars of Religion and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. He studies the make up of the Reformed communities in towns such as Alençon and Montpellier, the significance of book and painting ownership, Protestant devotion, relationships with Roman Catholics. One of the most fascinating chapters is the one dealing with the Breton reformed pastor Philippe Le Noir de Crevain in which we see how one pastor dealt with the conflict of his literary ambitions and pastoral responsibilities and ultimately having to flee the country. This book is a good example of the value of social history for church history. More focused but

still dealing with the same subject is *Huguenot Heartland* by Philip Conner.³ In this book Conner looks at a community where Protestants were in the majority and how that shaped its self-understanding and practice of religion.

One of the most significant Reformed leaders in the last two centuries is Abraham Kuyper. His monumental achievements as a pastor, churchman, theologian, educator, journalist and politician are well known. In *A Free Church, A Holy Nation – Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology*⁴ John Bolt offers us a fascinating and very stimulating study of Kuyper's political theology as applied to the American context. This book delivers far more than it promises. I thought it would be a rather interesting study of Kuyper's thinking on politics, but in fact it is a three-way interaction between that, the contemporary American culture wars and American history. There is much interest in Kuyper on the part of evangelicals involved in politics in the United States who are in search of theological roots. Bolt thinks that Kuyper is somewhat superficially understood by many of his critics and admirers and has to be understood within his own context and criticized at a number of points. In particular Kuyper still worked with a Christendom model of a Christian nation even though he wrestled with the issues of pluralism within Dutch society. It is his formative thinking on the latter that has the most relevance today as we confront issues of pluralism on an even greater scale than he did. Fascinating as Bolt's wide-ranging discussion is, British readers have to make adjustments for our different context. As the cultural consensus collapses Christians need to think along the lines of Kuyper's big themes of sphere sovereignty, antithesis and common grace.

While mindful of the dangers of political and cultural engagement and not dismissing the need of revival and the work of the Spirit in the churches, we must not fall into the trap of a form of Reformed pietism that is not concerned to see, however imperfectly, something of Christ's reign come in every sphere of life. But for me the most fascinating aspect of Bolt's book is his treatment of Kuyper's artistic imagination. By this he means not Kuyper's interest in the fine arts, although he had interesting things to say on this, but rather his appeal to the imagination in his advocacy of various causes. When he set out to rally the little people of the Netherlands to the cause of ecclesiastical and national renewal he sought to win their hearts as well as their minds. Reformed leaders today can learn much from Kuyper in this regard. What is so desperately needed today is a popular Reformed Christian movement that captures the imagination of people. In very different ways Whitefield and Spurgeon did this as well. Pray that the Lord would raise up men like them to reach our very different European culture.

One of the areas of church life where Calvinism has made its mark is in public worship. With their distinctive application of the sola scriptura principle the Reformed churches sought to order public worship in as biblical a way as possible. *Christian Worship in the Reformed Church Past and Present*⁵ is an historical and theological survey of public worship in Reformed churches. Parts one and two are the most helpful in looking at the historical development of Reformed worship and offering some reflections on contemporary practice. Of particular interest are the contributions from the developing world where Reformed principles have had to be applied in very diverse contexts. The discussion of the various

approaches of missionaries in the Dutch churches in the East Indies is illuminating. Some rigidly imposed Dutch patterns on the new congregations whereas others, and often indigenous pastors, sought to contextualize the worship. The chapters on Brazil and Korea show the way the European model was filtered through a somewhat revivalistic North American Presbyterianism. However the value of this historical section is lessened by the lack of any interaction with more conservative Reformed denominations. This deficiency is even more evident in the theological reflections in the third section. For a book from a Reformed stable there is little real grappling with Scripture, but rather a series of reflections on Reformed themes of worship – the centrality of the Bible, the significance of preaching, the place of the sacraments, etc. I suspect that most of the contributors are not evangelicals, which makes for problems. The impression one gets is of theologians trying to sustain a tradition but without the theological convictions that brought that tradition into being. So the practical result is the kind of watered down liturgical approach to worship that is increasingly common in mainstream Presbyterian churches. Interesting as this book is in parts I am afraid that it is symptomatic of how many of the historic Reformed denominations have lost their way theologically.

The same confusion but even more so can be seen in *Reformed Theology for the Third Millennium*.⁶ Edited by **Brian Gerrish** this book consists of the 2003 Sprunt Lectures delivered at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (the same series in which Gresham Machen delivered his lectures on the virgin birth). Again there are some interesting chapters in this book, not least Gerrish's own introduction on doing theology in the Reformed

tradition, but other chapters simply explore some rather esoteric areas of theology. Did Reformed aesthetics really contribute to the ending of apartheid? Whatever good Martin Luther King did can it really be considered a major contribution to Reformed theology?

What a different atmosphere we breathe in two books by **Roger Nicole**. Nicole is one of those theologians who has written relatively little, but what he has is worth its weight in gold. For many years this Swiss Reformed Baptist taught at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary where he exercised a formative influence on many students. In *Standing Forth*⁷ a number of his shorter writings have been brought together. The introductory chapter, 'Polemic Theology – How to Deal with those who differ from us', is full of wisdom and should be read by everyone who engages in theological discussion. His plea is that among other things we ask ourselves what we owe and what we can learn from those who differ from us. Would that more of the Reformed did that before they so easily condemned others. Most of the other essays deal with the two areas that have concerned Nicole. The first area is the Bible where there is excellent material on inerrancy, including the articles that Nicole wrote for *The Churchman* dealing with JDG Dunn's view of the Bible's inspiration. The other area is the atonement where Nicole defends the doctrine of definite atonement particularly in relation to Calvin. Then there are a number of miscellaneous essays dealing with a wide range of other theological issues. All in all this is a superb example of how Reformed theology should be done.

On a more popular level is *Our Sovereign Saviour, the Essence of the Reformed Faith*⁸ in which are collected

Nicole's addresses over the years at the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology held at Tenth Presbyterian Church under the direction of the late James M. Boice. Personally I owe much to these conferences when I was an undergraduate, which helped so many like me to be initiated into Reformed theology. This book shows how Reformed theology can be expounded in a winsome and popular way. Ministers and elders will profit from this book and it is an excellent book to give to church members and others who want to explore the Reformed faith.

Along the same lines of the last book is *After Darkness, Light, Essays in Honour of RC Sproul*.⁹ Edited by his son, these essays by a number of Reformed ministers and theologians are not scholarly in nature, but in keeping with the ministry they honour, seek to explain the Reformed faith in a popular way. The book is organized around the solas of the Reformation and the five points of Calvinism and there are some excellent things here. I particularly liked Robert Godfrey on unconditional election, in which he expounds the relevant canons of Dort, and Sinclair Ferguson on justifying faith. O. Palmer Robertson does a good job on definite atonement, but he unfortunately veers into speculation when he says that Christ remembered the names of each of his elect on the cross. Where in the Bible is that? But all in all this is another excellent book that deserves a wide readership.

Less popular but even more deserving to be read widely is *Counted Righteous in Christ*¹⁰ by **John Piper**. Here with his customary clarity and warmth Piper defends exegetically and theologically the historic Protestant doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, which is under sustained attack from several quarters. This doctrine is central

to the evangelical faith and all of us need the ammunition this book offers in order to defend it as well as the fortification it offers in order to preach it with confidence.

Turning again to history there are a number of recent books that I would like to mention briefly. In *Reformation Sketches*¹¹ **Robert Godfrey** gives us scintillating studies in Luther, Calvin and the Reformed Confessions. Originally written as articles in a magazine each of the short chapters deal with an aspect of the lives of the two great Reformers and the confessions. This is a good introduction to the Reformation. Another popular book that I much enjoyed is *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*¹² by **Christopher Elwood**. Illustrated with rather humorous cartoons by Ron Hill (although depictions of God would have been better left out), this book is a faithful, easy to read and understand exposition of Calvin's theology. I don't think it can be bettered and even to old Calvin hands it is a refreshing and even inspiring reminder of what Calvin taught. Unfortunately the book falls down at the end when Elwood tries to accommodate Calvin to a wide range of contemporary theologies. But don't let that put you off this really very fun introduction to Calvin

Paul Zahl, the very Protestant dean of the 4000 member Episcopal cathedral in Birmingham, Alabama, gives us a unique insight into the English Reformation in *Five Women of the Reformation*.¹³ Anne Boleyn, Anne Askew, Katherine Parr, Jane Grey and Catherine Willoughby each receive a chapter. What a remarkable group of women they were. They formed a group of lay theologians near to the centre of power and were very influential in advancing the Protestant cause. Three of the women were executed, one of them, Anne Askew, by

burning at the stake. Heaven will reveal how much we owe these women for the protestantism of England. The women covered in **Sharon James's** *In Trouble and in Joy*¹⁴ – Margaret Baxter, Esther Edwards, Anne Steele and Frances Havergal – were just as remarkable in their different circumstances. Here are women whose devotion to Christ had great influence for good and the advancement of Christ's kingdom. Evangelical Press have been publishing some other excellent biographical books.

Tim Shenton's biographies of the Welsh Baptist preacher *Christmas Evans*¹⁵ and the Cornish Anglican clergyman Samuel Walker, *The Cornish Revival*¹⁶ are both excellent, but the latter is particularly revealing. Walker is often neglected in considering the 18th century Great Awakening, but his life had a great impact in Cornwall and is a reminder of what God can do through a faithful ministry. Another unfamiliar chapter in church history is covered by **Crawford Gribben** in *The Irish Puritans, James Ussher and the Reformation of the Church*.¹⁷ Ussher is usually remembered for his dating of creation, but he was in fact a very learned and godly theologian who became Archbishop of Armagh. His great passion was the evangelisation of Ireland, a project that ultimately failed for a number of reasons. This book reminds us both of the remarkable spread of the gospel in the northeast of Ireland in the 17th century and the great impact of Puritanism in the 'Anglican' Church of Ireland. Its articles are far more Calvinistic than the Church of England's. This short book will give you much insight into the church in Ireland past and present. Let me leave you with two books that perhaps more than most illuminate where Reformed churches are today. The first is *Holy Fairs, Scotland and the*

*Making of American Revivalism*¹⁸ in which **Leigh Eric Schmidt** follows the trajectory of the Scottish communion season through American church history with particular reference to the camp meetings that were such an important part of the Second Great Awakening. These camp meetings are the historical template for revivalist meetings that became such a significant part of American popular Protestantism, perhaps reaching their apogee in the Billy Graham crusades. Here is a fine example of social religious history where the experiences of ordinary people are explored. So much of popular American evangelicalism is really a mutation of this kind of Scottish and Irish Calvinism.

But the book that I think most helps us to understand evangelicalism today and why Reformed Christianity has been so relatively marginalized within it is *Occupy until I come, AT Pierson and the Evangelization of the World*¹⁹ by **Dana L Roberts**. Most readers will remember Pierson as the pulpit supply at the Metropolitan Tabernacle during Spurgeon's last illness and after his death. He was in truth one of the most seminal figures in the history of evangelicalism and as Joel Carpenter says in his commendation it is hard to believe that he has not received serious scholarly consideration until now. Born in 1834, Pierson was brought up in New Light Presbyterianism sympathetic to Charles Finney. He trained at Union Seminary and after a difficult first pastorate became the hugely successful minister of the wealthy and influential Fort St. Presbyterian Church in Detroit. But in spite of his success Pierson felt something was wrong, not least in the comfortable respectability of the church and its failure to reach the urban working class. After a spiritual crisis he eventually became pastor of an evangelistically and socially active Presbyterian

church in Philadelphia. Along the way he picked up dispensationalism (through a conversation with George Müller on a train journey across the US) and began to move in holiness circles. He became closely associated with DL Moody and the work of the Student Volunteer Movement with its motto, 'The evangelization of the world in this generation'. Pierson became a key missionary strategist and the father of North American faith missions. It was he who introduced a reluctant Hudson Taylor to the North American churches. How Reformed Pierson was at the beginning of his ministry is difficult to say, but by the end he was a key figure in the dispensational, holiness, faith mission and Bible school movements that shaped the American evangelicalism we know today. If you want to know why Gresham Machen ended up such a marginal figure when the old Princeton school had been so influential in the 19th century then read this book. The problem was not only modernism but also the changing nature of evangelicalism. But Pierson also has much to teach us about concern for the lost, simple faith and zeal for the gospel. Spurgeon recognized his spiritual stature as one who lived for Christ. Robert has written an excellent biography that, while not always theologically sensitive (as when he says, for example, that in dropping his postmillennialism for dispensationalism Pierson started to believe in the second coming), is very illuminating both of its subject and of 20th century American and indeed international evangelicalism. But sadly it also illuminates the decline of influence of historic Calvinism within evangelicalism.

- 1 Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed, A Social History of Calvinism*, Yale University Press, 2002.
- 2 Philip Benedict, *The Faith and Fortunes of France's Huguenots, 1600-85*, Ashgate Press, 2001.
- 3 Philip Conner, *Huguenot Heartland, Montauban and Southern French Calvinism during the Wars of Religion*, Ashgate Press 2002.
- 4 John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001.
- 5 Lukas Vischer (ed.), *Christian Worship in the Reformed Churches Past and Present*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.
- 6 Brian Gerrish (ed.), *Reformed Theology in the Third Millennium*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003.
- 7 Roger Nicole, *Standing Forth, Collected Writings of Roger Nicole*, Mentor, 2002.
- 8 Roger Nicole, *Our Sovereign God*, Christian Focus, 2002.
- 9 RC Sproul, Jr., *After Darkness, Light*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003.
- 10 John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, IVP, 2002.
- 11 W Robert Godfrey, *Reformation Sketches*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003.
- 12 Christopher Elwood, *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- 13 Paul FM Zahl, *Five Women of the Reformation*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001.
- 14 Sharon James, *In Trouble and in Joy*, Evangelical Press, 2003.
- 15 Tim Shenton, *Christmas Evens*, Evangelical Press, 2001.
- 16 Tim Shenton, *The Cornish Revival, The Life and Times of Samuel Walker*, Evangelical Press, 2003.
- 17 Crawford Gribben, *The Irish Puritans, James Ussher and the Reformation of the Church*, Evangelical Press, 2003.
- 18 Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs, Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001 (Princeton University Press, 1989).
- 19 Dana L Robert, *Occupy until I come*, AT Pierson and the Evangelization of the World

Dr Kenneth Brownell
is the minister of East London Tabernacle
and editor of Foundations.