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Genevan Reformation and the American Founding (Book Review)

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notes important distinctions: “[We] run around peering eagerly about like every other creature—except that, so far as we know, we are the only animal dazzled by the splendor” (64), and “Outside of fantasy we are the only mammals that get about entirely on two legs, without even resorting to our knuckles” (276). Christians can easily ignore Sims’s references to evolutionary processes in order to glean many important insights about the wondrous creation of the human body.

As informative and readable as *Navel* is, it has some structural shortcomings. Some parts of the body are discussed in tiresome detail and other parts are given scant treatment. Sims admits that the book’s topics are based on his personal interests rather than a systematic survey of the entire body. Although the reader can appreciate his candor on this point, a somewhat more even treatment of the parts would have strengthened the book. A second weakness is that Sims’s many quotes are not referenced, so the interested reader has

no easy way to track down original sources on a particular point. Perhaps in compensation, the book does offer a detailed index and a selected (though lengthy) bibliography. Finally, like a Thanksgiving feast, the book is so generous with tasty quotes and facts that one leaves the table feeling quite full and happy but not remembering many of the specific flavors that were served; less breadth and more depth might have enhanced the meal and the book.

In the end, Sims guides us along a fascinating journey and points out many landmarks that we undoubtedly would have missed. An educated reader will certainly learn something new about herself and her culture that could not have been found in an anatomy text or history book. Most importantly, Sims’s insights about the human form appropriately deepen our sense of cultural history and call all of us to newly appreciate the wonder of this breathing clay.

Did John Calvin teach that “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God”? A review of David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*. (Lanham: Lexington, 2003). Xiv, 484 pages. Reviewed by Dr. Paul Otto, Associate Professor of History, George Fox University.

In *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*, author David W. Hall of the Kuiper Institute (www.capo.org/kuiper) sets out to explore the influence of John Calvin’s teachings on the founding of the United States. He argues that “John Calvin and his Genevan followers had a profound influence on the American founding” (vii). This claim, he says, is a necessary corrective after decades of obscurantism in which scholars have “read key events of the American founding period in terms of the subsequent interpretation of modernity rather than in terms of the antecedents of antiquity that led to the founders’ own perspectives” (x). While the author’s call for renewed attention to the potential role of Calvinism in the American founding is well to be heeded, and this volume highlights important evidence and raises interesting questions on this subject, it is nevertheless a significantly flawed effort at demonstrating the influence of biblical and Reformed thinking in on the creation of the United States.

The need for more fully considering the ideological origins of the American Revolution is certainly justified. The twentieth century has seen a vibrant debate on the coming of the revolution. At the turn of the century, historians began to challenge what has come to be known as the Whig view of American history. In this perspective, the American Revolution came about through God’s providential leading. American patriots

justifiably fought the tyranny of the British despot and ensured that democracy would flourish on American soil. The first challenge to this view came from the so-called Progressive historians of the era in American history of the same name. These posited, to paraphrase progressive historian Carl Becker, that the American Revolution was not so much a question of home rule, but a question of who should rule at home. In other words, Americans were not necessarily unified in thought, and their reasons for fighting the war or creating new governments had more to do with their own special interests, be they economic, social, or political, than with principles of liberty and justice. Such an interpretation held sway throughout the early and mid twentieth century. At the same time, something known as the imperial school emerged in which (mostly British or British-trained) historians centered their attention on England and suggested that a broader imperial view put the American Revolution in a whole new light. For example, some imperial-school historians argued that the American colonies’ revolt against the mother country was rather much like a child growing to adulthood and leaving home; it was just the natural course of things.

In the mid-twentieth century, both of these positions began to be questioned in two different but related ways. Americans, thick in the Cold War, felt the need to see their past with a greater sense of unity or consen-

sus. It was difficult to imagine the founding fathers fighting one another or social classes struggling against one another when the United States in the 1950s represented the vanguard in the fight against communism; instead, they must have been united in their struggle for liberty and freedom. At the same time, other historians began, for other reasons, to take seriously what the various patriots said when they challenged British authority. In particular, historian Edmund Morgan looked at the Stamp Act crisis of 1765 and argued that the British colonists were appealing to their traditional constitutional rights as Englishmen, not least of which was the right not to be taxed without representation. This interpretation came to be known as “Neo-Whig.” Hard on the heels of these assertions came a further analysis of the founders’ ideas. Bernard Bailyn, J.G.A. Pocock, and others, while not agreeing on all the particulars, argued that the rationale for revolution and the ideology at the root of new government structures could be found in classical notions of republicanism as it had developed in Europe and England in the preceding centuries.

Shortly after this “Republican Synthesis” began to emerge, the social crises of the 1960s and 1970s inspired many younger historians to resurrect the questions once asked by the Progressive historians earlier in the century. These “Neo-Progressives” undertook important demographic and economic analyses and asked what social conditions existed on the eve of the American Revolution. For example, who fought against Great Britain and why? The presumption behind much of this analysis was that ideology may have explained what the elite were doing or saying, but it did not explain the actions of the common man. Nor did it explain the various divisions that existed in society and varied from colony to colony.

Nowhere in this debate, however, has the question concerning Calvinism been asked in a significant way. Historians do not deny the place of Calvinistic and evangelical thinking in early America. Indeed, religion has gotten much attention, particularly by the Neo-Progressives who have tended to see it as a social and class movement. But for historians who have given attention to revolutionary ideology, they have tended to see connections with traditional English constitutional practice, classical and revived republicanism, and Lockean liberalism. Considering the significant role of Calvinism in the founding of several of the colonies in the seventeenth century, however, the lack of attention to the potential influence of Calvinism in the following century on the American Revolution and the founding of the United States represents a profound gap in historical analysis. David W. Hall seeks to fill this gap.

Hall sets about his task by considering the thought of

John Calvin and his followers, examining “leading tracts” (xiii) and other textual evidence from John Calvin and the followers of Calvin that relates to the nature and role of the state. In fact, after a first chapter in which he suggests some of the possible connections between Calvin’s teaching and Revolutionary America and Americans (including founders such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison), he looks all the way back to Augustine and the antecedents to reform in Geneva. Then, on a chapter-by-chapter basis, he examines and traces reformed political thought beginning with John Calvin, and continuing with Theodore Beza and other followers on the continent, John Knox and others in England and Scotland, the Pilgrims and Puritans, and ministers and teachers in America’s churches and colleges of the eighteenth century. His final chapter considers connections between Calvinism and the Revolution itself.

As Hall identifies Calvin’s theology and political theory and traces his legacy down through the decades to the American Revolution, he draws on a variety of primary sources and secondary sources. He traces the change in thought as incidents and circumstances affected Calvin’s followers. For example, he identifies Beza’s movement towards a moderated popular sovereignty in the aftermath of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. Concerning the American Revolution, Hall addresses several important issues. He points to the prominence of Presbyterians in eighteenth-century America. He notes the existence among the founders and founding documents of important reformed beliefs such as the depravity of man, the belief in Providence, and the sovereignty of God over all things. In his chapter on the American Revolution, he analyzes the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and early Congressional actions, identifying what he believes are instances of Calvinistic thinking. He also highlights intriguing connections such as Thomas Jefferson’s desire that the United States government acquire the Geneva Academy and bring it and its faculty to America. He gives special attention to Thomas Jefferson’s personal motto, “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God,” and argues that this idea is “unmistakably Calvinistic” (4).

As interesting and timely as this topic is, however, Hall’s treatment of the subject lacks the kind of careful and detailed scholarship that would make it a valuable and compelling work. The volume is particularly weak in its organization, the evidence used, and the author’s analysis and argumentation.

With Hall’s intention to “demonstrate how specific *religious* beliefs and the Calvinist understanding of the nature of man entailed a quite specific conception of limited government power that was embodied in our

Constitution” (vii-viii), one would expect that the main focus of the volume would be on the revolutionary era and the American founders. Indeed, two obvious choices of organization present themselves to the scholar wishing to consider the connection of Calvinism to American revolutionary thought. One could either carefully lay out the Calvinistic political theory by a thorough examination of the Reformed fathers and then discuss the possible implications for the American Revolution in a suggestive fashion, or one could summarize Reformation thought and then deeply analyze the founding era to demonstrate the connections. While this volume does more of the former than the latter, the intent of the book would seem to require the latter. As a result, the intervening analysis of Calvin and the legacy of his political theory is interesting, but one is left wanting more than a single chapter on the American Revolution, a chapter that only examines a few (albeit significant) cases in which one can find Reformed thinking. As argued below, the complexity of intellectual history requires a fuller and deeper treatment than this organization allows.

Even on the level of individual chapters, this volume is plagued by poor organization. The chapter on Calvin, for example, does not just cover Calvin’s theological and political thought, but looks at his personal history, the background of Geneva, and other tangential issues. These may provide interesting and, to some degree, useful background information, but they are overly long and not clearly connected to the main purpose of the book. The author also distracts readers with unclear or missing transitions and topic sentences, paragraphs with a split focus, and misleading subject headings.

The problems with organization are compounded by Hall’s use of evidence. On the surface, the book’s research appears to be founded upon a substantial bibliography. Indeed, Hall has read widely. It would be impossible to undertake a book with such broad scope without an equally broad reading of sources. It becomes clear, however, because of the breadth of the volume’s scope that Hall has had to rely too heavily on secondary sources. Instead of a thorough analysis of the primary sources (although he has selectively read and examined several important primary sources), he often quotes the primary sources secondarily through other scholars or simply accepts their assessment of the original sources. Related to this problem, he frequently makes claims that he backs up with nothing more than the assertions of other scholars and never cites supporting evidence for the claim. In fact, he often uncritically cites or quotes from nineteenth-century scholars or non-historically trained scholars. Finally, he does not come to terms with significant but contrary

interpretations; indeed, several important books on the ideology of the American Revolution are not listed in his bibliography, such as works by Pauline Maier, Paul A. Rahe, Gordon S. Wood, and Forrest McDonald. Considering the rich historiography of the American founding and Hall’s own profound counterclaim, he cannot afford not to address these other arguments. In the area of Calvinist political theory, he has neglected works such as those by H. Henry Meeter and Paul Marshall. He also does not address some of the most significant Christian arguments concerning America’s founding, such as the work by George Marsden, Nathan Hatch, and Mark Noll.

The most significant weakness in this volume lies with Hall’s analysis and method of argumentation. There exist a number of weaknesses such as non sequiturs (from Calvin’s critique of tyrants he argues that Calvin was opposed to monarchy), unclear and inconsistent methodology, and lack of clarity on the author’s actual argument. The last of these is particularly significant since a fair assessment of this book cannot be made without a clear understanding of the author’s thesis. While on the one hand he makes the disclaimer that “I do not intend to suggest that there was any one-to-one relationship between the political thought of Calvin and that of the American founders” (xi), throughout the book the author does indeed seem to be making that claim. Note for example his claim that “leading tracts [by Reformers] . . . were in fact extensively known and had a broad and enduring political impact” (xi), or the claim he highlights in his first chapter: that Jefferson’s personal motto concerning rebellion to tyrants comes directly from Calvinistic principles.

If, in fact, these are cases of the author simply overstating an otherwise limited argument (which is possible but not likely), then the book should have been refined in such a way as to make much more clear the indirectness of the connections between Calvinism and ideas of the founding fathers. If, however, he is really arguing a thesis stated in the volume’s conclusion, that “the links between Calvin and the American founding are . . . direct” (446), then he still bears much of the burden of proof for his argument. What is necessary in his methodology and analysis to convincingly make his argument are *connections* and *distinctions*. If the founders were inspired by Calvinist concepts, those concepts must be identified and their lineage traced through the years, decades, and centuries directly to the founders themselves. These ideas need also to be distinguished from the other systems of thought that may have influenced the founders. For example, the term *liberty* was commonly used in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. But what did it mean

to the various individuals who used it? If Calvin spoke of religious liberty, did he have in mind the kind of political liberty that the American founders subscribed to? Did some share the more traditional Calvinistic understanding and others the more modern Enlightenment understanding?

To elaborate further, in order to successfully argue genuine connections from the Reformation to the American founding, it is not enough to point to similarity of language or even generally similar concepts. What is needed is to demonstrate how, for example, Thomas Jefferson was inspired by Calvinistic thought when writing the Declaration of Independence. Others have argued for specific connections between the language and ideology of the Declaration of Independence and that of John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. Can the same close comparisons be made with Calvin's writings? Can it be demonstrated that Jefferson, Adams, or others were reading Calvin (or his followers) and had him and his ideas in mind when they argued a particular political principle? It is not enough to simply highlight the prevalence of Scots or even Presbyterians in eighteenth-century America, as Hall does, and presume they operated with Calvinist principles. There are many today who call themselves Presbyterians, but it does not make them Calvinists nor necessarily does it affect their political choices.

It is also necessary to make distinctions. The author argues that the ideas of the revolution largely stemmed from Calvinism, "that the American logic of liberty did not arrive *ex nihilo* in 1776 or spring self-evident from an Enlightenment Deism." Yet, as so many scholars have argued, many of the colonists' ideas could be traced to various sources: to republicanism, Lockean liberalism, and whiggery. These scholars have made compelling cases for these roots of American political thought. How do the Calvinistic ideas that Hall believes to be so prominent in early America compare with these? How can one distinguish between them? What are the fundamental principles of various ideologies, how are they expressed in terminology and government structure, and how do they compare with one another? One cannot successfully argue in favor of the influences of Calvinism on the American founding without acknowledging other influence and demonstrating how Calvinism is more obviously influential in

a particular government structure or principle than some other ideology.

This concern brings us to the question in the title: Did John Calvin teach that "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God"? To answer this question is to assess the essential value of David W. Hall's volume, since his basic assertion seems to be that central to the ideas justifying the American Revolution are the basic political teachings of John Calvin. The answer, as Hall himself indicates in the chapter on Calvin, is no. Calvin taught that obedience to God may require disobedience to man, especially when earthly authorities demand actions that are contrary to God's law, particularly actions that divert worship from the one true God. But even so, Calvin generally argued that responsibility for such question of authority rested with the lower magistrates (as he argued in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*).

So why does Hall draw connections between Jefferson's motto and Calvin's teaching elsewhere in his book, and by extension, between Reformed thought and the principles behind the American Revolution and the founding of a new United States government? Apart from Hall's poor line of argumentation, he is making an important and likely valid claim: that the influence of the Reformation must extend far beyond the boundaries of sixteenth-century Geneva. In this regard, this volume makes one important contribution: it opens a debate on the role of Calvinism in the American founding. In order to carry the debate forward and to make a convincing argument, however, what is needed is an understanding of the philosophical implications of Calvin's thought and those of the other reformers and how these did or could shape political theory. Then one needs to trace these theories down through various individuals and groups who called themselves Calvinists. Ultimately, one needs to look at the founders and their ideas. At each step of the way, these Calvinistic ideas need to be measured against the teachings of Scripture, and they need to be delineated and isolated from those concepts rooted in values alien to Scripture. A study such as that will not only help us understand the influence of Reformed thought in American society and politics, but take us several steps closer to understanding how Christians should understand politics and their political responsibilities today.