
Pro Rege

Volume 31 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2003

Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Keith C. (2003) "Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 31: No. 4, 32 - 34.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol31/iss4/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Book Reviews

Once Again, After a Long Pause, the History of Calvinism Peter Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*. Yale University Press, 2002. ISBN: 0 300 08812 4.
Reviewed by Keith Sewell, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

Many of us encountered the work of Philip Benedict for the first time in *The Huguenot Population of France, 1600-1685: The Demographic Fate and Customs of a Religious Minority* (1991). He has subsequently given us a succession of valuable studies on the Huguenots, not least in *The Faith and Fortunes of France's Huguenots*, published in the St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History Series (2001).

We now have before us a work of immense range, his *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*, and it is possible to see how much of his earlier work has related to this more comprehensive endeavor that has taken him fifteen years to complete (xxv). It is almost fifty years since a comprehensive history was last produced—John T. McNeill's *The History and Character of Calvinism* (1954). The differences between the two volumes are many, but three stand out for this reviewer.

Unlike McNeill, who was a presbyterian, Benedict does not write as a Christian believer. He confesses himself to be a non-practicing Jew with a secular upbringing (xxv). So we who are in some sense or other "Calvinists" must appreciate that Benedict is a stranger who is diligently inquiring into what is in some sense "our" history. In this it must be said that Benedict is very largely successful. He does not whitewash black episodes, but neither does he use them to misrepresent Calvinism. Most Calvinists will find themselves fairly represented here; few if any will consider themselves improperly caricatured. Moreover, Benedict, while writing what he terms a "social history," declares that he is on his guard against what might be called social reductionism. In his words, his avowed method "does not assume that the religious can be equated with the social or is relatively explained by it." (xxi).

This work is expressive of and inevitably dependent on the immense volume and range of reformation and post-reformation research that has been undertaken since McNeill wrote in the early 1950s. The subsequent half century has witnessed a definite expansion of historical knowledge in this field.

Although very comprehensive in the period covered, Benedict's work has very little to say about the history of Calvinism after the end of the sixteenth century. Indeed, it leaves us asking the question "Who will write a similarly comprehensive history of Calvinism from the early eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries?" For

Benedict, Calvinism is very much a sixteenth-and seventeenth-century phenomenon. On the few occasions that he moves beyond this time frame, he is liable to come unstuck—as with his reference to Kuyper as "neo-Orthodox," which to some will seem to imply a confusion with Karl Barth (298). Nevertheless, slips of this sort on the periphery of his narrative should not blind us to the solid merits of this work.

In my judgment, Benedict is right to insist that on the European continent the history of Calvinism must be placed in its wider context, not least in that provided by contemporaneous Lutheranism. This broader view enables us to focus on a key issue that confronted and animated the first generation of reformers: "How is the Living God to be rightly worshipped by his people?" Especially in the German-speaking lands, the "reformed" came to regard the *Evangelische* (Lutherans), with their retention of images and vestments, as seriously deficient in carrying forward the very reformation that Luther played such a central role in initiating. Here Benedict's discussions of the confrontation between Luther and Karlstadt (16-17), and the later confrontations between the Gnesio-Lutherans and the so-called "crypto-Calvinist" Philippists, well demonstrate the pertinence of these developments for our understanding of the history of Calvinism (74-76, 204-05). In short, the reformed exhibited a commitment to reformation principles that took them beyond the limits of Luther's eventual conservatism—and far beyond what Lutheranism was to become.

Benedict tells us that he was pursuing multiple goals when writing this work. His first goal was to answer, by way of historiographical narration, a number of key questions arising from the early history of reformed Christianity:

What accounts for the exceptional dynamism of this variant of protestantism? How and why, after an initial period of limited growth, were Reformed churches able to establish themselves across so much of Europe amid widely varying kinds of circumstances? What was Calvin's precise role in the definition and expansion of this tradition that ultimately came to be associated with his name? Given that he was a figure of the Reformed tradition's second generation, can he even be considered the most substantial shaper of the tradition? If so, how did he come to exercise

such influence? How and why did the tradition change in the generations following his death? (xix)

His second goal is to assess the wider impact of Calvinism on western society generally. Here the ghost of the “Weber thesis” still haunts the historical imagination. Beyond these two goals it is significant that Benedict found himself drawn into considerations of polity (xx). For the reformed, polity was never *adiphora*. This is an important insight, lending credence to the way in which Benedict confronts the first-order question of how to define the scope of his subject. He sees the reformed standpoint as being first exhibited in Zürich. It initially coalesced around certain key ecclesiastical issues. These were (a) the character of the Lord’s Supper, (b) the attainment and maintenance of purity of public worship—free of idolatry and improper symbolism, and (c) a due regard for the lawful application of church discipline (xxii f.). This thinking is sound. Only later did “Calvinism” become associated with the misleadingly named “Five Points of Calvinism” (xxiii, 305ff.), and then only after the term “Calvinists” had emerged as one of opprobrium amongst the Lutheran opponents of the reformed (113).

Benedict is on track in seeing rightness in the public worship of the living God as at the heart of the “reformed” reformation. Where psalmody is at a discount, and theatricality at a premium, there we may say that the reformed view of public worship is either unknown or in the process of being forgotten. Of course, a profound belief in the sovereignty of Almighty God—in a sovereign LORD who cannot be swayed or bought by pomp, circumstance and ritual—is what lies at the heart of these churchly concerns. Moreover, the “plainness” of reformed worship does not arise from any lack of imagination, but from an awareness that dissimulation is impossible before the living God. This approach to defining “the reformed” is useful because it does not discount the truth that—initially at least—both Lutherans and the Reformed shared a common Augustinian view of the sovereignty of God.

By focusing on ecclesiastical issues, Benedict is able to trace out the unfolding cohesion and diversity (and sometimes hot controversy) that mark the history of the reformed churches. He astutely distinguishes Zürich from Wittenburg so as to contrast the Swiss reformation from that led by Luther (9 f.). Having done so, he is in a position to “compare and contrast” Geneva under Calvin with Zürich under Zwingli’s able successor, Heinrich Bullinger (77 f.). Although Geneva did not always agree with Zürich, the two had much in common. While the consensus of 1549 mercifully resolved the question of the Lord’s Supper (55-59), the

two centers differed markedly on the issue of church discipline, and Benedict is particularly adroit in emphasizing the differences among the reformed on the role of the “civil magistrate” in relation to ecclesiastical discipline. On this matter Zurich was much more accepting of municipal control than Geneva, which insisted that church discipline stood beyond the competence of the civil magistrate. Here is the key to many a struggle in Scotland and the Palatine and beyond. Benedict’s clarity on this point makes it much easier to understand why the reforming English and Scots could receive conflicting advice from the Swiss (64, 167). By contrast, things were very different in the Netherlands, where reformed church discipline was not backed up by civil sanctions (200-1). Benedict is also right in seeing the Scottish Reformation as not being based exclusively on a Genevan template (162), and in recognizing that from a reformed perspective the Church of England following the Elizabethan Settlement was “but halfly reformed” (230 f.). Benedict’s solid grasp of the complexities of the continental European situation will greatly assist students to understand these issues in context. It will also help them to grasp why and how divergent positions concerning worship and polity came to confront the newly made protestant national churches of both England and Scotland (152 f., 230 f.). These issues were not only intrinsically profound, but, when merged with the struggle against royal absolutism, they imparted to Anglo-Scottish history in the seventeenth century its epic as well as schismatic character (384 f.).

The discussion of Calvin’s Geneva is forthright and robust, reminding us that it was only after 1555 that it could be said that Calvin was in control of the situation (101 f.), and even then grappling with the Bolsec and the issues he raised (103-4). Benedict’s discussion of Calvin is careful and restrained. He reminds us that Calvin said not to make “an idol of me or a Jerusalem of Geneva” (118). As might be expected, Benedict is at his best when narrating and assessing the Huguenot movement in France (127 f.). Here a considerable depth of learning lies beneath the surface of the narrative. And of course he is right to remind us that the reformed-presbyterian polity (with its ruling elders and multiple level of ecclesiastical assemblies) did not fully emerge until the time of Beza, and with the French situation particularly in view (135 f., 250). He discusses well the long and painful trials, the decline and fate of the Huguenot minority in France (369 f.). It hardly goes without saying that if the Reformed cause had triumphed in France, the whole history of Europe and the world would have been different. Europe would have had France as a Calvinistic great power, with all that would have entailed for Europe and the world.

One of the great merits of this volume is its attention to context—this is not a book about people writing books about books written by other people. At the same time, Benedict does not ignore the intellectual side of the history of Calvinism. Here, of course, a central issue is the rise of reformed scholasticism. Benedict acknowledges the size and complexity of this debate (298 ff.), while rightly avoiding extreme positions. What is scholasticism? How we construe the relationship between Calvin and any subsequent “reformed scholasticism” may be largely shaped by how we respond to this prior question. Are we talking about a teaching method alone, or are we talking about an implicit or explicit dependence upon Aristotelian logical, ontological, and anthropological categories? Is it valid to distinguish between scholastic method and doctrinal content? Benedict does not purport to plumb the depth of all these issues, but he is clear enough that there was an increasing tendency towards scholasticism from the 1560s onwards. Whatever the aspirations of Peter Ramus (299), the Calvinism of this period never advanced to the inner reformation of philosophical thought as such. Benedict has no stake in the re-legitimization of protestant scholasticism so fervently advanced in some quarters today, but he does not flop into the opposite extreme of erecting a Calvin free of scholastic influences either. He recognizes the power that scholasticism eventually achieved in reformed thinking. The best work on Calvin is that which places him in his context and that which recognizes the deeper direction of his thinking. Those who think of a sudden reversal towards scholasticism after the death of Calvin are as lop-sided in their way as those who would have us believe that there is no significant difference between Calvin and his successors. If at times Calvin is free of Zürich’s inclinations towards the *via antiqua*, it was Calvin who insisted on double-predestination (90) and Bullinger who rejected it (61). In telling the story of Geneva, Benedict always has in view the context set by Zürich (91 f.). Benedict’s deeply historical insistence that we view these matters in context is important. Accordingly, he does not spare us the more unseemly side of the circumstances surrounding the Synod of Dort (306-12).

If this is a book of many merits, what might be considered the problems? Three might be mentioned. One Benedict acknowledges: this work could say more about Hungary, Poland, and eastern Europe generally. What is provided is well worth having (257 f.), but in the English-language literature these areas remain poorly covered for linguistic and other reasons. We need the kind of detailed coverage for Hungary that we now have for Switzerland and Scotland.

Secondly, Benedict’s Calvinism does go into

decline. It seems to become introverted: pietism increases (not to be confused with piety), and confessional precisionism becomes more insistent, but it is not clear to me that this decline is adequately explained. Perhaps one statement by Benedict, with reference to the later seventeenth century, points the way: “New philosophies challenged neo-scholasticism’s Aristotelian underpinnings” (424). Later Calvinism’s theological precisionism found it hard to withstand the erosion of its inadequately examined philosophical foundations (cf. 348 ff.). The Calvinistic reformation implied an inner reformation of theoretical thought that was not adequately undertaken—and the remnants of Calvinism that survived into the early eighteenth century did so in a range of pietistic and/or confessionalist pockets. Those that were not undermined by the secularizing tendencies of the enlightenment stood to be absorbed by the successive waves of the rising tides of evangelicalism.

Thirdly, perhaps for reasons of space, Benedict seems to under-discuss some of the pivotal controversies to which he refers. These may be used to explore the inner character of reformed Christianity as well as the challenges with which it was confronted. Examples relating to English history include the controversies between Bishop Hooper and Archbishop Cranmer in 1550-1551 (237-8), Richard Cox and John Knox in 1555 (cf. 162), and Thomas Erastus and George Withers in 1568-1569 (214). And for France, the implications of the teachings of Moysse Amyraut are sadly under-developed (316-7). Appropriate expansion at this point could have enriched the discussion of Richard Baxter (323).

And what of the ghost of the Weber thesis? Here Benedict is ambivalent at best (541). The truth is that pre-industrial capitalism was well on the rise before Calvinism emerged as a distinctive and influential standpoint. Undoubtedly, Calvinism has had some impact on some of the societies within which it arose—perhaps in some situations making the rise of capitalism easier than where Catholicism was still in command. At the same time, we still need to explore the impact that capitalism may have subtly had on our notions of Calvinism, which now seems to have become remarkably individualistic. However, that discussion draws us into the eighteenth century—beyond Benedict’s conclusion and towards the history of Calvinism in the late-modern era.

This is an important book. Philip Benedict has put us in his debt. If you are a Calvinist of one sort or another, and you wish to understand something of the diversity and complexity of your lineage, buy this book, read it, and keep it in your library. For students of Calvinism, this volume will be indispensable.