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Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries, by Douglas F. Kelly (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1993). xii + 156 pages, paperback, \$10.95. Reviewed by Hubert R. Krygsman, Assistant Professor of History.

This brief volume arises out of discussions among members of the Christian Legal Society. Kelly reminds us of the vital contribution made by Calvinists to the development of modern Western legal and political theory, and in the process re-enters Calvinist views into current legal and political debate. Less convincingly, Kelly also emphasizes a continuity between Calvinism and the American constitution, and thus claims Calvin's imprimature for American republicanism.

The Calvinist political principles that Kelly surveys are familiar enough. In his struggles with Geneva's civil authorities, Calvin attempted to distinguish the "two kingdoms" of civil and ecclesiastical authority. Calvin maintained that both authorities were subject to divine law, and accordingly, he also asserted the limited authority of divinely appointed rulers and the right of lesser magistrates to hold them responsible for their tasks. Calvin's principles of separate authorities, limited government, constitutional checks have all been implemented in Western constitutions, albeit in revised form.

Kelly's interpretation of how Calvin's political ideas were revised and implemented may be the most unique feature of his survey. In short, Kelly finds in Calvin's own thought the vestiges of medieval constitutionalism, while Calvin's successors developed the full fruit of his principles into modern revolutionary constitutions.

In what may be the best chapter of the book, Kelly surveys the main sources of Calvin's political principles. Especially important to Calvin's development were the influence of late Medieval constitutionalism, the application of Renaissance methods of literary and historical analysis to Scripture, and a practical rather than speculative interest in relating theology to its current context. One might add to Kelly's list Calvin's interest in Seneca's Stoicism, just prior to his conversion to the Reformation. Although Kelly does not elaborate on it, his interpretation suggests that Calvin shared the brief Renaissance renewal of historical awareness. This interest is especially evident in

Calvin's new concern with the Old Testament. In particular, Calvin tried to distinguish between Old Testament ceremonial and judicial law, which he regarded as historically specific to Israel, and universal moral law. Also, Calvin asserted the positive, though subordinate, relationship of "natural" revelation of God's law in conscience and customary law to Scriptural revelation. Above all, Calvin's interest in the relationship between history and redemption is evident in his focus on the third use of the law for the restoration of human life to its God-given purpose, worked out in the life of the church under the headship of Christ.

Kelly uses the medieval roots of Calvin's thought to dismiss as "backward-looking" (27) those features which seem to him incompatible with modern liberty. Calvin's insistence on confessional uniformity among Geneva's citizens and his expectation of state support for Christian sanctity are described as "profoundly Constantinian and medieval" (26). Given the on-going debate concerning the Constantinian revolution, Kelly should define his reference here. One might argue that Calvin's belief in the sovereignty of God was directly contrary to Constantine's attempt to enlist the Christian church, and God, in support of his own imperial rule. Also, strikingly absent here is any discussion of Calvin's own view of "Christian liberty," which appears in Book Three of *The Institutes* in the context of the sanctified life of the redeemed. Calvin's "liberal" principles depend on the confession of God's sovereignty as the source of all reality, and on seeing Christian liberty as the positive restoration of human beings to the image of God.

In contrast to Calvin's medievalism, his successors are portrayed as "forward-looking" interpreters who surpassed Calvin himself in working out religious liberty. In their conflict with civil authorities who opposed the Calvinist Reformation, Calvinists in France, Scotland, England, and Colonial America opposed Erastianism with their claim of the sole headship of Christ over the church, and thus the separation of church and state. And in response to the tyranny of persecution they translated constitutional limits on the

civil authorities into sovereignty of the people. Despite Calvin's own opposition to revolution, these successors developed Calvinist principles into a revolutionary ideology.

Though only a minor key of the work, Kelly suggests how these successors "surpassed" Calvin. Beza and the Huguenot tractarians against French absolutism borrowed from Roman and scholastic legal theory to move from Calvin's view of God-ordained authority toward a secularized constitutionalism based on "natural rights," such as that government requires the consent of the people and that its purpose is to protect the people's liberty and safety. Knox also claimed the fundamental authority of the people, but did so on the basis of the Old Testament covenant between God and the people of Israel. According to Kelly, Knox's constitutionalism was more "Hebraic" than Calvin's, for Knox attempted to apply the Old Testament civil law directly in the life of the new, millennial covenantal people of Scotland (56). One might add that, contrary to Kelly's use of Perry Miller's classic portrayal of the colonial Puritans as undertaking a new "forward-looking" mission, recent work has shown the Puritans also to have understood themselves as a reconstitution of the primal Old Testament covenant. Thus, we see that Calvin's successors departed from his view of the integral relationship between divine law and history, and between Scriptural and natural revelation, toward a scholastic Calvinism which distanced Scriptural and natural revelation, divine law and history, church and state, mercy and justice. Kelly's own description of Calvinism as a "balance between nature and grace" (107) itself reflects this scholastic reinterpretation of Calvin.

In the end, Kelly's claim that a careful reading of

the Declaration of Independence reveals its Calvinist roots is true only in the most vague sense. Kelly makes his claim by minimizing both the important departures from Calvin's ideas and the extensive current scholarship on the Great Awakening and American Revolutionary thought. In the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, as well as the Presbyterian evangelical Jonathon Witherspoon, Calvin's view of the integration of Scriptural and natural revelation, and of divine law and history, was abandoned in favour of an exclusively "natural" moral philosophy. Though evident already in the Huguenot tractarians and in later Presbyterians like Buchanan and Althusius, the legacy of scholastic revision to Calvinism was demonstrated especially in the American Declaration of Independence. Its claim to the right of resistance based on "natural rights" highlights the acquiescence of Calvinists to the confinement of "religion" to the Bible and the church and the ascendancy of secularized constitutional theory based on "natural rights."

Kelly's claim that the American constitution was the finest fruit of Calvinist legal theory is therefore tenuous at best. Though a welcome reminder of the promise of Calvinist political theory, Kelly's book has set out to justify the American arrangement of religious liberty through the separation of church and state as a good in itself. In doing so he unfortunately has narrowed the scope of Calvin's claims. Moreover, Calvin, as well as Beza, Knox, and many other Calvinists, were both "backward" and "forward-looking" in working out their theories. Kelly's use of these terms serves to select and affirm those elements which became predominant especially in America—a form of analysis which Herbert Butterfield aptly described as history written by the winners.

A Vision With a Task: Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship, Gloria Goris Stronks and Doug Blomberg, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993). 326 pages, paperback, \$19.95. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Education.

I have two overriding concerns about this book. The first is that it may not be read by as many people as it should be. The second is that those who do read it may not take it as seriously as they should. Why these concerns?

For one thing, *A Vision With a Task* is a sizable volume—more than 300 pages. Will principals, teachers, school board members, and interested parents find the time to read it? And not only read it, but reflect on it, discuss it, and act on it?

My second concern requires more discussion. Why would those who read the book not take it seriously? Here is the reason: the book presents a vision and a

task so big that many readers will smile and say: "That's all very nice, but we live in the real world. My school isn't ready for this sort of thing until a lot of other things are changed, and I don't see a lot of other things changing very fast!"

A reaction of this sort reflects, of course, skeptical pragmatism. Such pragmatism judges practicality without first considering foundational issues. To be sure, questions of strategy, possibility, and practice are very important. But they can never be the first, the fundamental questions. *A Vision With a Task* has it right: we begin with the vision, and then move on to look at practical matters. If our vision is not clear,