
Pro Rege

Volume 10 | Number 3

Article 4

March 1982

Theology of Calvin (Book Review)

James A. De Jong

Dordt College

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

Recommended Citation

De Jong, James A. (1982) "Theology of Calvin (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*:

Vol. 10: No. 3, 23.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol10/iss3/4

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

Book Review

by John M. Zinkand

The Theology of Calvin by Wilhelm Niesel, translated by Harold Knight. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, a 1980 reprint of the 1956 Lutterworth Press translation of the 1938 German edition, *Die Theologie Calvins*. 258 pages, \$6.95. Reviewed by James A. De Jong, Professor of Theology.

Among the half dozen surveys of Calvin's thought available in English, Niesel's is one of the most helpful. Although over forty years old, it remains lucid and balanced in its presentation of the major ideas developed by John Calvin. In preparing this volume, Niesel followed the arrangement and the substance of Calvin's *Institutes*. But he supplemented Calvin's thought there with copious references to the reformer's sermons, commentaries, prefaces, and other writings. What results is a solid, reliable, and manageable introduction to the theology of John Calvin.

Niesel begins with a brief analysis of the state of Calvin studies in his day. This analysis was updated for the English translation in 1956, but remains untouched for the present reprinting. It and the "Supplement," also prepared for the 1956 edition, are both helpful, even indispensable, resources on Calvin material published before that date.

Substantively, in successive chapters Niesel handles Calvin's thought on the following topics: the knowledge of God, the trinity, creation and providence, sin, the law of God, the two testaments, the mediator, Christ's grace within us (i.e., union with Christ and the appropriation of salvation), the Christian life, prayer, election, the church, sacraments, and civil government. The author has an unusual gift for pithiness and clarity of expression. He rarely misses the heart of Calvin's thought.

Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell by John H. Gerstner. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980. 93 pages, \$4.95. Reviewed by James A. De Jong, Professor of Theology.

Professor Gerstner, who teaches church history at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, offers us in this book an interlude in a much larger project. The author is editing the sermons for Yale University Press's critical edition of all Jonathan Edwards' extant writings. We are grateful to both Gerstner and Baker Book House for giving us a glimpse of themes present in those sermons before they appear in the Yale volume. Actually, Gerstner supplements his sermon findings on the two topics of

Today if one could suggest modifications in Niesel's format, one would wish to see chapters on Scripture and the Holy Spirit, two subjects about which Calvin wrote, both of which are subjects of current debate. What is also obvious in Niesel's explanations is his Neo-orthodox orientation, seen in his highlighting of the problem of natural theology, his expressions on divine revelation, and his treatment of divine election. But for one who is aware of the writer's orientation, the treatment of Calvin is not inhibited by these factors.

Like so many theologians before him, Niesel grappled with the problem of finding "a golden thread" which unifies Calvin's thought. At one point he suggests the futility of such a quest, since Calvin was simply attempting to be faithful to the diverse and complex themes of Scripture. Toward the end of the book, however, Niesel ventures his opinion on this issue: "We think we have showed plainly enough that in every aspect of doctrine Calvin is concerned only about one thing: namely, the God revealed in flesh" (page 246). Passages in Book I of the *Institutes* suggest that Niesel may have fallen into the same trap into which he saw others fall.

Niesel's study belongs in the library of anyone who is a serious student of John Calvin. Its strengths so far outweigh its weaknesses that it will remain one of the first sources on Calvin to which inquirers and scholars alike turn for decades to come.

heaven and hell with excerpts from and references to *Miscellanies*, a collection of some fourteen hundred reflections on various subjects. What is produced are composite pictures of Edwards' ideas on heaven and hell, each arranged under ten selected rubrics.

The popular and even the scholarly image of Edwards is one of a preacher who delighted in painting vivid verbal pictures of eternal punishment for his frightened listeners. Gerstner does not dispel the idea that Edwards