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Justin Bailey

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"Evangelizing Everything" Including Ourselves: A Review of Chapters 8-9 of Neo-Calvinism

Abstract

"We are overly tolerant for what happens within the walls of the Christian community, and overly suspicious of what happens outside."

Posting about the book *Neo-Calvinism* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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“Evangelizing Everything” Including Ourselves: A Review of Chapters 8-9 of Neo-Calvinism

Justin Ariel Bailey

February 9, 2023

Title: *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*

Author: Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto

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I often recall a conversation I had with a librarian who joked that it is easier to steal books from Christian colleges than secular universities. Although Christians believe in pervasive depravity, their libraries tend to have little security. Meanwhile, public universities—operating on much more optimistic accounts of human nature—take much stricter methods to prevent theft. Of course, there are multiple reasons to explain the gap in vigilance. But the librarian’s point was that Christians often assume that all the danger exists outside the community. Thus, we are overly tolerant for what happens within the walls of the Christian community, and overly suspicious of what happens outside.

Christians, of course, have reasons to hope that the communities we create will be marked by honesty and integrity. And yet, on matters of far greater gravity, we often find that (to quote Kuyper) “the world turns out to be better than expected and the church worse than expected.”¹ How does Neo-Calvinism reckon with this paradox? And if “the church” sometimes feels no different than “the world,” what may we hope when it comes to the gospel’s transforming power, in and through the church?

These are the sorts of questions in view in chapters eight and nine of Brock’s and Sutanto’s book. Chapter eight unpacks a signature doctrine of Neo-Calvinism, common grace, which names the abundance of gifts outside the walls of the church. All of this, Neo-Calvinists contend, is divine generosity, “a confession of the love of the Triune God to the cosmos in toto.”² If humans find any goodness, beauty, or truth in a fallen world, we owe thanks to God not only for it but also for our ability to grasp it. In a world under the curse of sin, common grace curbs “absolute sin in the human heart,” “complete death in the human body,” and “universal curse in nature.”³ Common grace accounts for human religiosity, ethical order, and aesthetic delight; it grounds cultural engagement and the pursuit of cultural wisdom. Yet in all

these domains, while common grace preserves creation, it is only the work of Christ through the Spirit that can heal it. To use Kuyper's image, common grace provides the soil in which the tree of redemption must grow. For although God is graciously present and at work in every culture, the gospel must always come from the outside.

This brings us to chapter nine, which explores the complex relationship of the church to the wider world. The church is a part of the world (it exists in interdependence with other created structures), yet stands against the world (it resists its fallen directions), for the sake of the world (it seeks the renewal of every part of life). Here the authors cover the familiar distinction between the church as institution and church as organism, showing how a Neo-Calvinist ecclesiology prizes the church's institutional life ("Neo-Calvinism calls for the church to live through the power of Christ for the sake of the renewal of the small world that each Christian community occupies,"⁴) but also offers flexibility for the church's organic life (in which believers are dispersed throughout society, permeating every sphere with the leaven of the gospel). As a "counterculture for the common good," (Tim Keller's phrase), the church is called to "evangelize everything." (Bavinck's phrase⁵)

But what does it mean to evangelize everything? What it does not mean, the authors make clear, is coercion. It is Christ who claims every square inch, not Christians: "There is no possibility of building or ushering in the kingdom of God apart from Christ's Parousia." Christians testify to his coming kingdom by seeking the renewal of every area of life, calling "the family, the public, and the state to walk in alignment with creational norms reaffirmed by Jesus Christ."⁶

This is the church's task, even as we proceed with chastened expectations. This brings me back to the conversation I had with the librarian, and the question of why the church can seem so bad and why the world can seem so good. These chapters help us navigate the confusion, offering two postures to orient our cultural task. First, because of common grace, we proceed with convicted curiosity, confident that there are gifts and wisdom waiting for us outside the walls of the church, even if the wisdom we find is uneven and incomplete. Second, because of the gospel, we proceed with careful discernment, seeking to evangelize everything.

"Everything," critically, includes the church, the place where both care and discernment must begin. Until Christ returns, the church always remains in need of evangelization, the constant comfort and confrontation of the good news of Jesus.

We might say that a common thread here is surprise—the surprise of common grace (leading to gratitude) and the surprise of the gospel (leading to repentance). There is also the surprise of sin, but perhaps for Calvinists that should not be so surprising. How does theology pull us away from our fixation on mastery, possession, and control (the way of the Empire), pushing us towards vulnerability, suffering, and surrender (the way of the Cross)? Cultivating a posture of astonishment at grace is an excellent place to start.

I am thankful to Sutanto and Brock for writing a book that had me ready to cheer out loud at multiple points, reminding me of why I feel at home in this Neo-Calvinist tradition, even if it, like all traditions, always needs to be evangelized, too.

This review is the fourth in a series of five that will engage “Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction”. Neo-Calvinism is a distinctive of Dordt’s historical background.

1. pg. 215

2. pg. 221

3. pg. 220

4. pg. 271

5. pg. 280

6. pg. 281