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Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell

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acceptance of the supposedly “neutral” features of contemporaneous western culture serve to raise confronting questions about the entire sequence.

One problem with this series, including Treloar’s book, is that it is light on the overall relationship of evangelicalism with its surrounding culture. Why?

Arguably, the answer lies in the point of departure exhibited across the entire five volume series. These volumes are written from *within* the perspective of evangelicalism itself. As a consequence, the series tacitly assumes the validity of the reductionism implicit in Bebbington’s “quadrilateral.” It views evangelicalism *from within* and *according to* this frame of reference. To make the point in another way, this series is valuable in that it provides an insight into how some evangelicals now view the history of evangelicalism on its own terms.

That said, after reading this series, we

are left asking the following question: How different would it be if we were to abandon a historiography of evangelicalism as here restricted by the reductionism implicit in the “Bebbington quadrilateral” and re-write the story from the standpoint that all of life is to be lived *Coram Deo*, before the face of God? In other words, how would the structure of the narrative change if we were to critically reassess the history of evangelicalism from a standpoint that acknowledges that Christ’s call to discipleship—“Follow Me”—knows no limits, no sacred / secular dichotomies or intellectual boundaries, and includes every lawful calling and human activity?

If we were to take this step, we could acquire a sharper view of our history as the people of God in the world, of our calling as we confront our current predicament, and of the challenges that will soon be upon us.

Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms. Tuininga, Matthew J. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 386 pp. ISBN: 978-1-107-17143-5. Reviewed by Keith Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt College.

Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms is an important work. Matthew Tuininga is Assistant Professor of Moral Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. This book is not a “quick read.” It requires a sustained effort across more than nine full chapters, and although Tuininga’s readers will learn much from him, they will need to study this work with every critical faculty keenly engaged and be fully alert to the fraught interplay between envisioning Calvin sympathetically in his context, and using his work and reputation in order to validate the “two kingdoms” thinking of certain later reformed thinkers.

The current resurgence of “two kingdoms” thinking owes much to David VanDrunen’s *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (2006) and *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* (2010). These works confirm the continuing strength of scholasticism in some circles. VanDrunen is the Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, CA. VanDrunen’s early work was on Thomas

Aquinas. Tuininga’s work is that of a disciple of VanDrunen (viii, 19).

This book purports to be presenting Calvin in his own terms and in his own context, but in reality it does something else—it presents Calvin in terms compatible with Tuininga’s and VanDrunen’s commitment to their “two kingdoms” standpoint. In short, while Tuininga claims to be holding the Calvin texts and his latter-day “two kingdoms” commitment apart (9), in practice his “two kingdoms” commitment exerts a strong gravitational pull over his discussion of the Calvin texts. The “two kingdoms” standpoint does not necessarily presume to set aside Christ’s kingship over all human culture. Rather, it makes the distinction between the church as an institution, and the surrounding culture in which it is situated, so sharply that the terminology of “two kingdoms” becomes a matter of course. As a consequence, it may be inferred, or even asserted, that the followers of Jesus Christ have and share much in common with the thinking and conduct of unbelievers.

Accordingly, while Tuininga does not set out to defend liberal democracy, he is keen to demonstrate how, what he repeatedly calls “Calvin’s two kingdoms theology,” offers Christians a way of understanding how they might participate in contemporary liberal democracies that they do not control (3-5, 322). To this end, Tuininga provides his readers with a full overview of Calvin’s reformation setting (23-60), and the attempted reformation in France (61-91), as prelude to a detailed discussion of Calvin’s teachings on the kingdom of Christ, its spiritual character, covenant and law, the responsibilities of the civil magistrate, and resistance to tyranny (92-354). This is the backbone of the book, and the reader will find here much that is instructive and worthy of further reflection.

At the same time, he or she will need to be fully alert. A key difficulty is that Tuininga repeatedly insists on finding Calvin’s “two kingdoms theology” in passages where Calvin does not use that terminology himself. The result is misleading, and readers would be well advised to check passage after passage for themselves. For example, Tuininga states that “Calvin’s two kingdoms paradigm” pervades his discussion of Micah 4:3 (178), but when we consult his commentary on this—“the nations will beat their swords into ploughshares”—passage, we find that Calvin says “the scripture speaks of God’s kingdom in two respects,” but nowhere in this particular discussion does he use the term “two kingdoms.” Similarly, with respect to Calvin’s exposition of Joseph’s policy in Egypt as presented in Genesis 47:22, Tuininga tells us that “Here Calvin’s two kingdoms distinction guides his logic”; but again Calvin does not employ any *explicit* “two kingdoms” language at this juncture (315). Perhaps a further example will suffice. With regard to Calvin’s commentary on Romans 14:17—“the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy on the Holy Spirit”—Tuininga insists that “Calvin’s two kingdoms distinction” is evident (157), but again, the explicit use of a “two kingdoms” wording is not to be found.

In short, there is a serious problem here. While Tuininga may present himself as leaving

the advocacy of this “two kingdoms” doctrine until his conclusion (355-78), his commitment to this doctrine greatly colors his presentation of Calvin, to such an extent that he arguably overinterprets Calvin in his own favor. This question must be asked: if we had never previously encountered the “two kingdoms” doctrine at all but had diligently studied the aforementioned passages from Calvin’s commentaries, would we have found that doctrine to be as ubiquitous in Calvin as does Tuininga? The point here is not that the use of this term is always *verboten*, but that it is overemployed by Tuininga in order to support his thesis.

At the same time it should be acknowledged that Calvin’s thought was not free from problematic Hellenistic tendencies. His anthropology exhibited Platonic or Neo-Platonic influences (151-7). He had his own notion of “natural law” (369-72), a pliable concept that may function within a scholastic-dualistic natural/supernatural or secular/sacred framework. The presence of such tendencies, the legacy of centuries of Christian intellectual accommodation that the Reformation did not eradicate in an instant, confirms the need to exercise caution when we interpret and appropriate Calvin’s writings.

Of course, Calvin wrote in the Latin and French of his day, and some translators may be inclined to use “kingdoms” in the plural, where others might simply use the word “twofold.” The latter can on occasions be overly stretched to mean “two kingdoms.” In the Ford Lewis Battles edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* (1960), at Book III.19.15, the section heading is given as “The Two Kingdoms.” However, this expression does not appear in the original as a heading or in the text to which it refers. Calvin’s intention here is to stress the “twofold” governance to which man is subject—“*duplex in homine regimen*.” In his translation of Book IV.20, Battles guides us well by using the term “twofold” and does not employ the term “two kingdoms.” Interpretation and inclination are in play at such points. For example, Elsie Anne McKee, in her fine translation of the 1541 French edition of the *Institutes*, (2009) uses the term “two kingdoms in people” at the start of chapter 16, while the original reads “deux

regimes en l'homme," and not specifically "deux royaumes."

That the kingdom has a "twofold" character, in the sense of having come but not yet being fully realised, is something to which Calvin often refers, as Tuininga frequently observes (139, 179-81, 280, 358), but in Tuininga's hands this consideration is too readily utilized to support his "two kingdoms" reading. By contrast, it is not irrelevant that half a century ago the American scholar H. Harris Harbison, in some of the most satisfying and stimulating paragraphs written in English on Calvin's view of history (*Christianity and History*, 1964, 279-287), focused on Calvin's understanding of the kingdom of God without ever having recourse to "two kingdoms" terminology.

While Tuininga tries to overcome the dualistic tendency in "two kingdoms" thinking (1, 92, 182, 356), it inevitably comes to expression. He rightly draws attention to the distinction of the church as an institution, and the church as the people of God, as also found in Abraham

Kuyper (373, 375-6). However, while Tuininga is comfortable with the church as an institution coming to visible and corporate expression, beyond the pale of the institutional church it is apparently only as "individual Christians" that we are called to witness "to the righteousness of the kingdom" (376). Presumably there is a place for the seminary. However, the Christian political organisation, or the Christian university, and much more besides, are not in contemplation. There are issues here way beyond the scope of this review, but many will find this approach to be hopelessly inadequate in the face of the increasingly strident neo-paganism evident across the western world.

In his final book (2003), Heiko A. Oberman lamented the baleful impact on Calvin studies of those who oriented their research projects to their latter-day theological agendas. He was right, and it is also right for us to remind ourselves that the scriptures only ever speak of one kingdom of God.