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Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: A Response to Keith Sewell



by Matthew Tuininga

I am grateful to Keith Sewell for taking the time to read my book, *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms*. However, I was surprised to find that Sewell decided to engage the book not on its own terms but through the lens of Sewell's disagreements with David VanDrunen.

In the very first paragraph of his review, Sewell warns readers of the book to be alert to the “fraught interplay” between interpreting Calvin in his context and using Calvin's work to “validate” the agenda of “certain later Reformed thinkers.” What later Reformed thinkers does he have in mind? That's

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what the second paragraph of the review tells us: David VanDrunen. Sewell charges that my work is that of a “disciple” of David VanDrunen. Thus, as he puts it, “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, Sewell is saying, this book has an ideological point of view that undermines its credibility as a work of original scholarship.

Sewell offers no evidence for this less than charitable claim. He assumes, without demonstration, that VanDrunen and I agree on a particular two kingdoms “standpoint.” And he goes on to describe my understanding of two kingdoms theology as if it were identical with VanDrunen's. This is hardly the case, as other reviewers have pointed out.

Assuming that he can conflate my work with VanDrunen's, Sewell never even bothers to summarize the book's core thesis, let alone to engage its methodology. Ignoring the substance of my argument and my survey of the evidence, he spends much of the review complaining that the precise terminology of “two kingdoms” does not appear in many of the passages in Calvin that I explore. With the same superficiality, one could just as easily dismiss two millennia of Christian reflection on the Trinity by noting that the word “Trinity” does not appear in a single passage of scripture.

Had Sewell taken the time to engage my argu-

ment, he might have noticed that my core claims are neither about Calvin's concept of culture nor about Calvin's understanding of the institutional church nor about Calvin's use of two kingdoms terminology. My core argument is about Calvin's theology of the kingdom and the way in which the kingdom breaks into the present age. It rests on a vigorous and systematic analysis of Calvin's exegesis of Scripture and his eschatology. In its essence, the book argues that Calvin's two kingdoms theology is not fundamentally a theology of institutions but a theology of kingdom eschatology. As I put it in the introduction, "Calvin's two kingdoms arise out of a theological doctrine of biblical eschatology. For Calvin the two kingdoms are fundamentally *eschatological* categories. They correspond primarily to the concepts of the eternal and the temporal and only secondarily to the institutions of church and state" (17-18).

A good review should at least introduce potential readers to the central arguments and methodologies of a book before it purports to critique that book. Even a few sentences would do. Sewell does

not seem to think this book deserved that level of intellectual respect. His review merely encourages readers to prejudge the book on the basis that it challenges Sewell's own preconceptions. This is perhaps symptomatic of the times in which we live, but it is hardly healthy for constructive academic discussion, let alone for thoughtful Christian public engagement.

Sewell's cynicism shows in his charge that "it is apparently only as 'individual Christians' that we are called to witness 'to the righteousness of the kingdom' (376)." I was surprised to read this criticism, especially since on the very same page of my book that he quotes I write that in the public realm "Christians witness, *individually and sometimes collectively*, to their convictions regarding the justice and love demanded by the gospel" (376).

I could say much more, but I hope this response has been enough to encourage readers interested in Calvin's political theology to read the book on its own terms and with an open mind rather than through the less than charitable framework through which Sewell has introduced it.