
Pro Rege

Volume 31 | Number 3

Article 5

March 2003

Calvin for Armchair Theologians (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

McConnel, Tim (2003) "Calvin for Armchair Theologians (Book Review),"

Pro Rege: Vol. 31: No. 3, 31 - 32.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol31/iss3/5

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Book Review

Elwood, Christopher. *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*. Illustrated by Ron Hill. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. Reviewed by Dr. Timothy McConnel, Assistant Professor of Theology, Dordt College.

Books about Calvin tend to focus on certain aspects of his theology and are written for the theologians' guild. This one is a refreshing exception, having as its target a general audience. Elwood's purpose is to introduce Calvin to those who may have heard of him but have never taken the time to read him. He presents a sympathetic, albeit not uncritical, portrait of the sixteenth-century reformer, noting the major incidents and controversies in his life, and giving a summary of the famous *Institutes*.

"Who was John Calvin?" Elwood begins his book with this perhaps obvious question and then spends the next 175 pages answering it. The summary of Calvin's background and education brings up the familiar outline: his education at the University of Paris, shifting from the study of theology to law at the behest of his father; Calvin's fascination with the humanist studies of the day, as well as his exposure to the Lutheran reformation; and the key turning points in Calvin's life, including his friend Nicolas Cop's All Saints Day address in 1533 and Calvin's subsequent flight to avoid arrest, resignation of his benefices ("church appointments," as Elwood calls them) in 1534, and the infamous event of the placards later that same year. With the latter (as with Cop's speech), suspicion rather than actual involvement necessitated Calvin's removal from Paris. Calvin would remain an exile for the duration of his life.

At this point in the story, Elwood introduces readers to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The first edition was written by Calvin in Basel and published in 1536. It was immediately acclaimed and secured Calvin's reputation. As such, it played a role in the next major stage in his life. After traveling to various places, he set out for Strasbourg but had to detour through Geneva. As Elwood puts it, "he soon found it was easier to get into Geneva than to get out"(19). His reputation had preceded him, and the local reformer, Guillaume Farel, strong-armed him into staying to help continue the reformation there. Here, as in several places in the book, Elwood makes use of an endearing pedagogical technique—referring to something that is commonplace to his readers to make a point. Here, he refers to Dale Carnegie's famous work, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, to illustrate Calvin and Farel's failure to work well, and persuasively, with those with whom they disagreed. Instead, within two years they were directly and forcibly exiled. Calvin

then made it to his destination of Strasbourg, but Geneva again called him back again in 1541 to bring order to the turmoil there. Calvin was to stay for the rest of his life.

Calvin continued with the thorough-going reform of the church in Geneva. As Elwood puts it, Calvin continued to "lose friends and alienate people" (26) as a high-handed foreigner, but he never lost complete support again. Calvin never exercised civil power in Geneva but served only as the head of the Company of Pastors.

Calvin's reform included several "tools," as Elwood portrays it: reforming the teaching, worship, and structure of the church; training candidates for the ministry; lecturing and writing commentaries on scripture; and revising and expanding his most influential work, the *Institutes*.

Elwood goes through each of the four books of the final edition of the *Institutes* in turn, summarizing and discussing major aspects of each book. For Book I, "How We Know God as Creator," he includes Calvin's notion of the natural knowledge of God, the seed of religion; the problem of idolatry; the corrective lenses of God's word; Scripture (including the often mentioned notion of accommodation); the knowledge of God; the doctrine of the Trinity; and providence.

For Book II, "How We Know God as Redeemer," Elwood highlights Calvin's doctrine of original sin and total depravity; the role of the law (including the three uses of the moral law); and especially Jesus Christ as our Mediator, the incarnate Word of God, the one person who is fully God and fully human, the one who fulfills the threefold offices of prophet, priest, and king.

Book III, "The Inner Work of Healing," turns to the "inner experience of one who is on the receiving end of God's work of love and healing"(79). This includes the work of the Holy Spirit to unite us to Christ, the nature of faith, and the results of faith in justification and sanctification. It was at this point that Calvin turned to the doctrine of predestination, and Elwood follows suit. He devotes more space (nine pages) to this doctrine than to any other in Calvin's work. He not only deals briefly with the objections that Calvin handled but also shows a sensitive awareness of the continuing problems that Christians today have with the doctrine. He ends the section by noting that Calvin and many of his contemporaries found the doctrine to be enormously comforting. He also states that, while Calvin clearly

taught predestination, it is not the central or defining doctrine of Calvin's theology; rather, Calvin teaches it in the context of God's free grace being the foundation of our salvation.

The summary of Book IV includes a discussion of Calvin's view of the church, visible and invisible; the marks of the true church; church order; and the sacraments. The summary ends with a lengthy discussion on the role of the civil government. Calvin's last chapter has continued to fascinate modern readers. (For example, it takes up an entire section in McNeill's "Introduction" to the Library of Christian Classics edition of the *Institutes*.) This continuing interest may be due to claims that have been made for Calvin's influence on the development of the republican form of government.

After completing his survey of the *Institutes*, Elwood turns back to biographical issues but not in strict chronology. He turns to controversial aspects of Calvin's reputation, particularly dealing with the trials in Geneva of Jerome Bolsec and Michael Servetus. Bolsec publicly opposed Calvin on the issue of predestination and was arrested and brought to trial on charges of heresy. After Bolsec was found guilty of teaching false doctrine and of falsely accusing the Genevan pastors of doing so, he was banished from the city.

Servetus' case was more difficult. He had already been condemned to death by the Catholic church in Vienna for denying the doctrine of the Trinity when he showed up inexplicably (albeit incognito) in Geneva. However, he was recognized and arrested for heresy. Calvin, with whom Servetus had corresponded, was one of the chief witnesses against Servetus at his trial. Servetus was found guilty and executed by burning at the stake (in spite of Calvin's plea for a more merciful execution). This event, more than any other, has served in subsequent history to brand Calvin as an intolerant persecutor. While not defending him, Elwood suggests that Calvin should be seen as a man of his time rather than being judged by the standards of our day.

The final chapter of *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*

describes how Calvin's influence has continued. While Elwood criticizes the famous Weber thesis of the influence of Calvinism on capitalism and also suggests influences on subsequent political developments, he sees a more direct connection to the church and theology. He describes Calvin's influence upon the Reformed scholastics and the later Puritans, and suggests that both liberal and fundamentalist theology can be seen as Calvin's children. He further points to Barth and even liberation theology as candidates for family membership, leaving one wondering if anyone can be excluded. If one includes a "critical spirit" as the hallmark of Calvin (as Elwood suggests for Schleiermacher), then why would the Anabaptists not clamor for inclusion? After all, they were just as critical, if not more so, of the preceding tradition as Calvin was. Perhaps it would be better to see at least some substantial agreement with what Calvin actually taught, in order to claim his heritage, and not just a perceived attitude. Furthermore, central to Calvin's criticism of Catholic theology was its innovation; he consistently sought affirmation of his views in the ancient creeds and fathers of the church, as well as in scripture.

Two further criticisms might be noted of the work. The volume is generously illustrated with humorous but generally appropriate drawings by Ron Hill. However, in Elwood's dealing with a theologian who was so strongly opposed to pictorial representations of God, his having a number of illustrations that do just that seems jarring and out of place. The author and illustrator obviously don't share Calvin's iconoclastic sensibilities. The author also fails to make use of citations from Calvin's *Institutes*, quoting only once or twice. Although he is writing for a general, novice audience, learning the standard reference notation (e.g. I.1.1) for the *Institutes* is not difficult.

Having said all this, I would argue that Elwood succeeds admirably in his goal. He has written a very readable, relatively brief introduction to the life and theology of John Calvin. Those who want an introduction or perhaps a refresher course to Calvin will find their needs well served by *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*.