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Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell (Book Review)

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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

preached frequently on the subject of hell. He supplements it, however, with the interpretation of a man who also rhapsodized on the blessedness of heaven. In the only place in his book where he offers hard data on the proportion of these two emphases, Gerstner says,

. . . we found among the 140 sermons on Matthew, 13 devoted explicitly to heaven, 23 to hell. Of the 43 Mark sermons there were 7 on heaven and 4 on hell. Luke's 111 had 10 on heaven and 13 on hell. (page 52)

In contrast to much modern homiletical theory, Edwards preached repeatedly on hell as a means of warning and frightening impenitent sinners. His goal was always their repentance and escape from divine wrath. His motive was always compassion for the unawakened sinner. Gerstner correctly emphasizes that Edwards' procedure was one of softening the sinner for the warmth of forgiving grace presented in Christ.

Ultimately what heaven consisted of for Edwards was "the beatific vision," that is, an intellectual-spiritual vision of God with the eye of the soul. That blessedness begins here on earth, but it continues to develop even in the next life. It is experienced in the communion of the saints, but it is consummated in contemplation of the glorified Christ, in whom we see God. Thus it is a place of happiness derived from union and fellowship with one another and with Christ. Gerstner indicates that from heaven the saint beholds this world and even hell;

he is aware of Christ's redemptive victories in history and rejoices in the vindication of God's justice in the place of torment. Presumably, until the bodily resurrection, the eye of the soul contemplates earth and hell from heaven.

For Edwards, hell is the converse of heaven. It is the place of fire and torment, both spiritually and physically. Not only are there levels of torment, as there are levels of heavenly beatitude, but self, others, and the devils are all instruments of this pain. The agony is not tempered by one shred of divine mercy in this place where God is seen in the just wrath which is as much his essence as are his love and forgiveness. Edwards located hell in this present world, a world afflicted with divine punishment.

One lays down Gerstner's book with a sharper, although not an unfamiliar, understanding of classic Protestant doctrine of these two subjects. Edwards' mysticism adds perhaps the strongest nuance. One might wish that Gerstner had reflected on Edwards' doctrine of the soul or had justified categorizing his thought systematically when Edwards himself so clearly preferred a redemptive-historical approach to biblical teaching. But those are considerations obviously outside the author's purview and we cannot fault him for drawing the boundaries of his study where he did. It is enough that we see more clearly than before that Jonathan Edwards' sermons reflect God's love and the promise of heaven as well as God's wrath and the threat of hell.

Adrianus Saravia (c. 1532 - 1613) by Willem Nijenhuis. Vol. 21 in *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*; Heiko A. Oberman, editor. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980. 404 pages. Reviewed by James A. De Jong, Professor of Theology.

Professor Nijenhuis has once again distinguished himself as a scholar of sixteenth century continental Calvinism. He has done so this time by presenting us with the first biography of a significant Dutch churchman. The book is based on exhaustive research into archival and manuscript sources kept in several European countries, as well as on a mastery of pertinent sixteenth century sources and of secondary literature.

The book is divided into three sections. The first treats Saravia's life and work, the second his thought, and the third consists of forty-nine letters from his correspondence with significant European leaders in church, academia, and politics. The letters are in Latin, with the exception of a few in either French or Dutch. The first two sections have been translated into superb English, which masks the Dutch original in all but a handful of places (eg. pp. 49 and 62). A rich bibliography and copious indices complete an excellent study worthy of the Brill name.

Born in French-speaking Netherlands, Saravia as a young man entered monastic orders. He was converted

in 1557, Nijenhuis estimates, and ministered both to refugees in London and to churches in the southern provinces. A letter written a half century later to Johannes Uitenbogaert by Saravia, according to Nijenhuis, emphasizes the role Saravia played in formulating and circulating the Belgic Confession in the early 1560's. From 1563 to 1578, however, Saravia served as headmaster of two English schools. A decade of service, culminating with his position as rector magnificus (president) of the University of Leiden, followed in the Netherlands. Always an Anglophile, Saravia found his career in the Netherlands cut short by his suspected collusion with the Duke of Leicester, who designed to bring Leiden under English control by using military means. Saravia fled to England where he eventually obtained a number of ecclesiastical positions which brought him wealth, influence, and prestige.

Theologically Saravia has been known in mission literature for crossing swords with Theodore Beza over the binding character of the Great Commission. Beza argued the position usually held in his day that Christ's