

The History and Character of Calvinism

By John T. McNeill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 480 pp., \$9 (used paperback).

John McNeill writes concerning the history and character of Calvinism with thoroughness and balance. Some may question why a study of Calvin is a worthwhile endeavor to which we let the author reply:

He [Calvin] has been execrated and defamed, admired and extolled. His influence has sometimes been jubilantly reported to have expired; but it has survived the authors of the reports. He remains so famous that, as is wont to happen with the great, persons ignorant of his life and work pronounce judgment upon him with the utmost finality. But he will not be thus easily dismissed (p. 93) . . . It is not easy to evaluate a great personality who has been spiritedly attacked and defended through four centuries. The fact that thousands of pens have been busy about him is itself evidence that he is not to be casually estimated. Some historians may prefer to ignore or belittle him, but with a certain insistence this frail, earnest Frenchman comes back to haunt their researches. At his own request, no stone marks his place of burial, but little of him was really buried there. His fame endures, and his influence will continue to defy time and oblivion. (p. 227).

The book consists of four major sections: 1) Huldreich Zwingli and the Reformation in German Switzerland; 2) Calvin and the Reformation in Geneva; 3) The Spread of Reformed Protestantism in Europe and Early America; 4) Calvinism and Modern Issues. I found the first two of the sections to be of the greatest value and interest. Although the latter two sections contain important information, they attempt to cover so much ground that the list of names, movements, and counter-movements begin to blur since there is insufficient space to go into any of them with much depth.

If you are looking for significant treatment of the development and interaction of Lutheran and Reformed doctrines during the Reformation, you will not find it here—the contribution of Luther and Lutheranism to the development of Calvinism is not a focus for the author.

Calvin's strengths and weaknesses seem to be fairly evaluated, and some misconceptions concerning what he taught (e.g., concerning physical prosperity) are dispelled. One comes away with a much greater appreciation for the man and the historical context in which he ministered—not to mention the positive influence of his teachings upon both church and state. Many of the ideals that we consider to be the bedrock of western democracy (e.g., the equality of all men and right to self-govern) developed out of the incubator of Calvinism as it came to be practiced in France, Scotland, England, and what came to be the United States.

At points, the author's treatment of his subject matter seems to favor liberalism. He is overly positive in his treatment of the gains of ecumenical movements within Calvinism while making light of the glossing over of significant doctrinal differences which were

often papered over in the process. He also follows in the footsteps of some modern Christian writers who see the imposition of capital punishment for witchcraft by earlier God-fearing societies as a mark of their lack of civility. By the same measure, we would have to condemn the practices of the theocracy of Israel under the Mosaic law (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Eze. 13:18-23)--the very law which Scripture holds to be "perfect" (Ps. 19:7), "holy, just and good" (Rom. 7:12). The author's problem is not with Calvin's Geneva or the early American Puritans, but with Covenant Theology and its failure to recognize important distinctions between Israel (which was given the law) and the Church (which is not under the law). The *Biblical* reason we don't impose capital punishment for witchcraft today has less to do with civility and more to do with progressive revelation and distinctions among the peoples of God. But these are minor criticism concerning what is an otherwise excellent introduction and treatment of Calvin and the movement which came to be identified with his name.

All believers owe it to themselves to learn about this important period in church history and the personalities God used, such as Calvin, in bringing the church to where it is today.

Reviewed by Tony Garland of www.SpiritAndTruth.org.