Henk van den Belt (ed.)


The Calvin centennial of 2009 generated a considerable number of academic conferences which resulted in published symposia. The volume under review emerged from a gathering of the International Reformed Theological Institute hosted at the John Calvin Seminary, Aix-en-Provence, in summer 2009. It will naturally be compared with other volumes generated through conferences held elsewhere during the same centennial year.

Restoration through Redemption is predominantly given over to theological consideration, broadly considered. The standpoint is—broadly-speaking—one of general confessional sympathy with Calvin, for even where his views are shown to have limitations, this is made clear with a respectful deference to his memory. Its contributors, with four North American exceptions, stand on an ‘axis’ joining the Netherlands, France and South Africa. By way of contrast, an Irena Backus and Philip Benedict-edited volume generated in the same centennial year, Calvin and His Influence: 1509–2009 (Oxford, 2011) represents the approach of historians of Christianity (and of Reformation Europe) to John Calvin. These, while acknowledging Calvin’s historical and theological significance, have no obvious collective interest in the fortunes of the Reformed churches or the theological legacy of the Genevan Reformer.

A particular strength of Restoration through Redemption is the careful work of editor van den Belt. His winsome introductory chapter prepares the reader for a three-fold analysis of Calvin’s teaching which is to follow: i) the Reformer’s own theological thought, ii) essays which begin from our present situation and which draw on Calvin’s thought as a resource, and iii) what may be called the ‘reception-history’ of Calvin’s thought in subsequent locations and epochs.

Writing from within a North American context, this reviewer wishes to highlight two features of the volume. First, readers outside Europe will benefit especially by digesting the essay (chap. 15) of John Hesselink, “Calvin Studies in North America”. Here, in broad strokes, Hesselink describes a resurgence of North American interest in Calvin himself (as opposed to Calvinism, which had ample advocacy earlier) commencing with the republication of his biblical commentaries and theological tracts in the 1940’s (almost exactly one century following their fresh translation in early Victorian Britain). This development, indebted to some degree to the writings of the neo-orthodox theologians of that era (who themselves drew afresh from Calvin) has had a largely beneficial effect down to the present day. Hesselink’s portrait leaves out little of real importance.
And yet, having acknowledged this ‘return to Calvin’ over the past seventy years, North American conservative Reformed theological thought has been brought into a kind of ‘servitude’ to Calvin which is quite uncharacteristic of Reformed thought over preceding centuries. This ‘servitude’, stoked also by the original release of the Victorian-era translations, has left too many who are ‘keen for Calvin’ suffering from a kind of theological tunnel-vision. It is widely considered defensible to quote the Genevan’s opinions—whether from commentaries, treatises or the Institutes—as though there had been no movement of thought beyond Calvin (or at least none worth mentioning) in intervening centuries. Calvin’s wide availability in translation (equaled in English only by Luther) has led to unsustainable conclusions. Calvin’s very availability in translation has facilitated a kind of theological ‘primitivism’. And this leads the reviewer to praise a second aspect of Restoration through Redemption.

As one peruses the middle section of the volume, one finds chapters which consult Calvin as a theological resource on the questions raised by evolutionary biology for reformed theology (chap. 6), on the question of Christ’s atoning death in relation to modern concerns about justice and violence (chap. 7), and on contemporary understanding of the Lord’s Supper (chap. 10). Such essays are worthy models of how Calvin’s writings can enrich theological reflection, without also marginalizing or rendering irrelevant the theological reflection by others since the sixteenth century. More such exemplary essays are sorely needed, for in our modern context it seems that two extremes prevail: Calvin either overshadows Reformed thinkers of later ages because of his deemed colossus-like status, or is utterly marginalized and ignored as a pre-modern Christian thinker. This reviewer is grateful to have seen essays which treat Calvin with a genuine respect and with a clear sense that the state of the question is not precisely what it once was.

It is a common trait of symposia (as of the conferences which produce them) that the presentations are uneven in quality. Such is life. Restoration through Redemption offers a fine collection of primarily Dutch and South African essays on the ongoing theological significance of Calvin for our time. It is exemplary in combining a healthy respect for the Genevan reformer with a readiness to place the man and his convictions on the continuum of ongoing Christian theological reflection.

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