

## Timothy George, *John Calvin and the Church*

*John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, edited by Timothy George. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990. 276 pp. \$14.95 paper. Reviewed by James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor, Gilwood Presbyterian Church, Concord, North Carolina.

Anyone interested in the life and thought of John Calvin, the history of theology, the life of the church, the interpretation of scripture, or worship and preaching will be richly rewarded by this collection of essays. All of them were first given during the 1982 to 1988 meetings of the biennial Colloquiums on Calvin Studies held at Davidson College and the Davidson College Presbyterian Church in Davidson, North Carolina. Because the Colloquiums bring together a diverse group of academicians, pastors, and other church people, this volume bears witness to the increasingly broad attention being paid to Calvin and to the application of that study to the life of the church today. This publication was made possible through the support of the William Keesecker Fund for Calvin Studies, and it is dedicated to "John Haddon Leith, distinguished preacher, teacher, theologian, *Doctor Ecclesiae* in the worthy tradition of John Calvin" (p. 5).

As a collection of essays, this book does not have a continuing argument to evaluate, though it does make a repeated and convincing argument for the importance of Calvin and Calvin studies. Following George's Introduction, it is divided into five parts. Part I examines "Calvin in Context." The lead essay is by historian William J. Bouwsma, making the dual point that Calvin's theology tells us much about the century in which he lived and that it cannot be understood apart from its historical setting. One conclusion is the rejection of the depiction of Calvin as a systematic or systematizing theologian. Instead, Bouwsma presents Calvin as a biblical theologian and a humanist rhetorician committed to the reform of the church and the world in his own time. The second essay, by theologian Timothy George, traces the development of Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper which led him to the Agreement of Zurich, binding together the Zwinglian and Calvinist reforms. The third and perhaps most unusual and fascinating essay, by medical doctor Charles L. Cooke, examines Calvin's illnesses in order to understand their impact upon his work and to appreciate more fully his accomplishments. All of Calvin's diseases—chronic tophaceous gout, chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, intestinal parasites, hemorrhoids, spastic bowel syndrome, and migraine headaches—"are capable of causing severe pain or severe difficulty in breathing. All are capable of producing severe weight loss, anemia, and weakness" (pp. 62-66). He probably died of septicemia, brought about by renal failure or uremia (p. 66). Calvin's "illnesses were not alleviated, they were not cured, nor were they controlled. Notwithstanding the tremendous drain on his energy, Calvin became one of the most productive and influential thinkers in history" (p. 68).

Part II turns to Calvin's "Theology." William Klempa takes up the question of natural law in Calvin's thought, hotly debated during this century, while David N. Wiley tackles the perennial question of predestination, explicating the development of Calvin's doctrine of election as the foundation of the church, with special emphasis upon "the comfort and assurance it provides the individual believer" (p. 113).

Part III takes up "Ecclesiology." Charles E. Raynal III, the only contributor currently serving as a pastor, tells of the importance of the academy in Calvin's reform of the church and society and concludes that this continues to be important for today's church: "Calvin's Academy shows that the church needs an explicitly confessional academic community of faculty and students devoted to training leadership for the church. . . . The model of the Genevan Academy does . . . show the legitimate place and the necessity of higher education conducted on the basis of a confession of faith in the historic Christian beliefs" (p. 132). Alexander McKelway draws upon Calvin to address "the importance of learning, the relation of faith and knowledge, and the proper use of language" (p. 135), all at risk today. Elsie Anne McKee examines some of Calvin's exegetical writings to explicate the source of his understanding of the office of elder.

Part IV explores Calvin's "Interpretation of Holy Scripture." George W. Stroup begins with an observation and a question: "Although unequipped with the tolls of historical criticism, Martin Luther and John Calvin seem to have been remarkably able to discover and communicate

the gospel. To put the issue as simply as possible, what did Luther and Calvin know that we do not?" (p. 159). To answer the question, he explicates the use of narrative in Calvin's hermeneutic. Roland M. Frye deals with Calvin's understanding of figurative language in scripture and his use of the same in interpreting scripture. James Luther Mays addresses "the engagement between Calvin's approach and that of current Old Testament study of the Psalms" (p. 195), looking at Calvin's introduction to his Commentary on the Psalms not only for its well known biographical information but particularly in regard to exegesis.

Part V concerns "Worship and Preaching." John H. Leith reviews and responds to recent studies of Calvin's preaching and sermons, looking at his doctrine, method, and style of preaching, and then suggests applications to preaching today. Leith's thesis is: "It is not enough to speak of Calvin as a biblical preacher. He was that. He was also a theological preacher who understood human existence in the light of a clearly conceived theological framework and who had a vision of a holy community that fulfilled God's purposes in history" (p. 224). Hughes Oliphant Old sets forth the influence that the prophets, through their emphasis upon "true, obedient, and sincere worship," had upon Calvin's theology of worship (p. 230). Finally, Carlos M. N. Eire focuses upon "Calvin's Attack on Idolatry" as a central theme in his work to reform worship.

This book is not meant to be a comprehensive introduction to Calvin but a collection of specific, advanced essays. All of them are excellent, provocative, and helpful. Pastors, professors, students, and other educated church people alike will benefit from this volume.