

1989

Review: John Calvin: a 16th-century Portrait

John D. Morrison

Liberty University, jdmorrison@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs

Recommended Citation

Morrison, John D., "Review: John Calvin: a 16th-century Portrait" (1989). *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 85.

https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/85

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

evolution of Adam from some previously existing animal life form, in direct contradiction of the Biblical account in Genesis) or who are "concordists," who try to harmonize the order of events in Genesis 1 with the order of events in the imaginary timetable of evolutionary geology. Whitcomb pinpoints the reason for all such unbiblical thinking as "the immense pressure placed upon them [concordists and theistic evolutionists] by the uniformitarian/evolutionary consensus of the scientific establishment of the late nineteenth century." He's absolutely right! Men would still rather believe men than God.

The book closes with an excellent exegetical, theological, and common sense refutation of the "Gap Theory," or any other "ruin-reconstruction" theories. All the issues involving the use of such words as *yom*, *bara*, *asah*, and *tohu wabohu* are dealt with thoroughly. Accommodation to "science" is the only reason such "theories" still hang on.

Significant updating has been done, and this revised edition is well worth the purchase.

JOHN A. SPROULE
CAPITAL BIBLE SEMINARY

John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait, by William J. Bouwsma. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Pp. 320. \$22.95. Cloth.

William Bouwsma's study of John Calvin is itself as much a study in tensions as was the man it seeks to portray. This is an important work, a work that ought to be read by those interested in Calvin, the Reformation, the history of Western civilization, etc., but its success in accomplishing its titled task is at last mixed. Much effort and Bouwsma's strength in historical insight have been brought into play, yet whether it is in fact Calvin in the portrait or something not quite explicit or definable is not at first clear.

From one side this work represents a historian's attempt to do with Calvin what Eric Erikson sought (I think largely in vain) to do with *Young Luther*, that is, to come to some understanding of a great man (Calvin) by means of careful analysis of words and metaphors used in order to piece together, in this instance, a "psychology of Calvin." This is precarious stuff at best. Such analysis removed four hundred years cannot help but be heavily disfigured (*cf.* Erikson) and any illusions that were held in Erikson's era of psychology as an exact science have long since eroded. Admittedly, Bouwsma, as a historian, has a far greater sensitivity to historical context but at the very least I fail to see where he has actually worked his way through the "hermeneutical circle" central to his format (*cf.* below).

Further, Bouwsma is, to a great extent, using Calvin prismatically, i.e., as an avenue into the anxieties of the sixteenth century and the unharmonized polarities in its philosophy, its religion, its politics, and its anthropology. In the age of eclecticism Calvin is set forth as the true, though unresolved, eclectic man. Before this issue of Bouwsma's historical use of Calvin, there seems ever to implicitly underlie reflection of an *almost* restrained desire in the author to set forth a lesson for our troubled times.

ing animal life form, in direct is) or who are "concordists," Genesis 1 with the order of ary geology. Whitcomb pin- ing as "the immense pressure olutionists] by the uniformi- tablishment of the late nine- ould still rather believe men

cal, theological, and common y other "ruin-reconstruction" ch words as *yom, bara, asah,* ccommodation to "science" is

is revised edition is well worth

JOHN A. SPROULE
CAPITAL BIBLE SEMINARY

William J. Bouwsma. Oxford: Cloth.

is itself as much a study in This is an important work, a l in Calvin, the Reformation, s success in accomplishing its uwsma's strength in historical her it is in fact Calvin in the able is not at first clear.

istorian's attempt to do with ely in vain) to do with *Young* g of a great man (Calvin) by phors used in order to piece 'in." This is precarious stuff at rs cannot help but be heavily were held in Erikson's era of roded. Admittedly, Bouwsma, itorical context but at the very ed his way through the "her- w).

ing Calvin prismatically, i.e., nth century and the unhar- n, its politics, and its anthro- et forth as the true, though Bouwsma's historical use of e reflection of an *almost* re- 1 for our troubled times.

From almost the first page, one of the central purposes of the book is to show Calvin not as reformer or preacher of Scripture or as theologian of the church (indeed these are often played down in themselves) but in all things as a true disciple of Erasmus. There is no question as to the influence of humanism on Calvin's development and thought (historical-grammatical-cultural interpretation of Scripture in a humanist method of approaching a literary text), but to make him at most points another Erasmus is to push with a strenuousness that exceeds legitimacy. Places where Bouwsma admits differences are done grudgingly.

Another side of Calvin, one often approached indirectly is that of the reformer as Scholastic, a medieval man of the church. Calvin's time was an era of transition and tension (as noted above). There was in Calvin that which Bouwsma refers to as the conservative, philosophical Calvin, the man of overriding theological and political principles whose content often clashes with the contradictions and complexities of life. This is the Calvin who, says the author, fears the "abyss," the chaotic, the anarchistic effects of unrestrained freedom. Herein lies the basis of his title (applied by many, im- properly, both politically and religiously) "the tyrant of Geneva." Bouwsma points out in this perspectival setting that both Thomist and Ockhamist views were vying in Calvin as they had been for almost two hundred years in theology/philosophy. But, at the same time, there was also, says Bouwsma, Calvin the politician/rhetorician, or to be more precise, Calvin the Machiavellian. Bouwsma even goes so far at one point, as to call the God of Calvin the preeminent manifestation of the Machiavellian prince. Why Bouwsma would refer to the recognition of Practical differences and the sensitivity to situations, peoples and cultures as Machiavellian is a significant question, especially considering the modern connotations that have arisen around the very name and "methodology." The reference or attachment would seem at least a little forced, especially since Machiavelli was a near contemporary whose influence would have hardly been felt by Calvin directly and whose reckoning of ethics and their source Calvin would have reviled.

One would surely have to acknowledge Calvin's role as reforming Churchman par excellence. Far more than Luther or the other reformers, Calvin's concern for the church and that which comprises or is required for there to be a true Church are explicitly developed (Book IV in the *Institutes*). While, as Bouwsma notes, Calvin was no ecclesiolgist in any systematic sense, he clearly saw that in the Church pre-eminently (and in all the spheres of the Christian life) Christ was to be exalted, the clear focus of attention. This is clearly Calvin's climactic concern in all issues in which he engaged polemically. This point is sadly lacking in Bouwsma's analysis, here and throughout, and to miss the Christological center of Calvin is to miss the living ardor of Calvin. This (Christology) was, for example, the reason for his twofold definition of the Church: first, where the Word is preached and, second, where the Sacraments are rightly administered. This issue (contra late medieval Roman Catholicism and its self perception following the Fourth Lutheran Council) was Christological. One additional point, regarding Calvin the Churchman, which I use by way of example to reflect what results from Bouwsma's handling/ use of Calvin, is a statement of Bouwsma's regarding Calvin's view

of Scripture, "To Calvin the notion of verbal inerrancy would have suggested willful blindness" (p. 122). This statement, a manifestation of Barthian interpretation of Calvin, has been long and often been shown to be incorrect (cf. Edward Downey, A. M. Hunter, R. Seeburg and O. Ritschl as some examples).

But this previous print brings to light in small part what Bouwsma does methodologically throughout the work and in all of the above mentioned issues, i.e., it seems that he wants to make Calvin into something particularly significant to Bouwsma himself. There are hints in every section, particularly in the first half of the work, that this "portrait" of Calvin is in fact a means whereby a historico-religious question is being grappled with in the author's own life.

As noted at the outset of this review, the reviewer's final response to this work is somewhat ambivalent. It is a significant contribution to Calvin studies and will need to be interacted with on several issues. When studied critically and with some prior background in Calvin's life and thought this would *then* be a useful graduate/seminary text to use with Calvin's works. But as an introduction to Calvin and his thought within the sixteenth century context T. H. L. Parker's biography would be more useful. When put all together Bouwsma's "sixteenth century portrait" of John Calvin lacks real humanity—it is largely a cacophony of parts.

JOHN D. MORRISON
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Heresies: the Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present. By Harold O. J. Brown. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988. 486 pp. \$18.95. Paper.

The author of this treatise, a professor of historical theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, believes that the doctrines of Christian orthodoxy are all to be found in the Scriptures as the "faith once delivered to the saints." He acknowledges, however, that some features of orthodox belief, especially those that pertain to the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, are only implicit in the New Testament. This has led to great controversies which forced the church to define its position in the ecumenical creeds that reached the apex of definition at Chalcedon in 451. Heresy then, despite its damaging effects, has exerted a beneficial influence by compelling Christians to affirm their theology and Christology in precise terms.

Brown covers a vast array of heresies from ancient teachings such as Gnosticism, modalism, and Arianism to the contentions of modern rationalism, although his treatment of the twentieth century is very scant. This book is rich in historical data which show how and why particular deviations occurred. Brown concentrates on theology proper and the person of Christ.

He give
This is a

Alt
judgme
careless
Darby's
kind of
New T
would l
sational

It i
and Pe
August
verify it
were "a
in the s
Paulici
denied

WI
without
insisten
clusion
transub
shows
careless
rather
immers
vast ma
of Bapt
Al

errors
author's
writers
quently
Brown

Less 1
1986. 1

SI
"How