

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms

Matthew J. Tuininga

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017 (400 pages)

Whoever might think nothing new can be said about the theology of John Calvin will be corrected after reading Matthew J. Tuininga's book, in which he explores Calvin's political thought as a two-kingdoms theology that can function as a model for constructive Christian participation in liberal society.

The author is convinced that Calvin is a relevant voice for contemporary Christian political theory, and he offers the basis for this conviction in nearly four hundred pages of a very close reading of Calvin. Tuininga demonstrates his point with restricted reference to secondary sources—although he does engage in well-founded arguments against some of the authorities in the field—and through extensive quotation of the work of the Genevan reformer. In a classical and clear academic approach, the reader is first informed on the state of research on this topic and on the various concepts of the relation between spiritual and political authority that circulated in early modern Europe. From there the author presents his analysis of Calvin's understanding of this relation and how it pertains to Calvin's views on natural law, God's covenant, and the right of resistance to tyranny. In the meantime Tuininga manages to remove many of the misconceptions about Calvin's position by merely referring to the sources and proving that the widely held ideas about Calvin's role in, for example, the controversies over predestination and the heretic Servetus are simply wrong.

The main point of the book is to present how Calvin defined a thoughtful approach to public life that was rooted in his understanding of the gospel and its teaching concerning the kingdom of God, and how that view is relevant for a Christian attitude toward politics and public life today. Convincingly, Tuininga states that Calvin was committed to keeping the church distinct from the state and that here Calvin also presents a middle road between theocracy and sectarianism. Calvin was of the opinion that civil law cannot establish spiritual righteousness but that governments still are bound by the law of God and have a calling to promote and defend true religion. This position, according to Tuininga, comes from Calvin's two-kingdoms theology. Interestingly, the author states that Calvin's position on the state's care for religion came more from his view on natural law than from his exegesis of Scripture. It might be asked whether these are really two different sources. That is, doesn't the Bible also contain much of natural law?

Tuininga is well aware that we read Calvin from our context and through the lenses of the history after Calvin and before us, which is why he does not focus on Calvin's political actions and opinions but on his political theology. This is why this book is so relevant. Tuininga moves beyond a historical approach and presents Calvin's theological ideas as useful even long after Calvin.

Tuininga has written a highly interesting and rich book that serves not only the academic world, and the field of Calvin research in particular, but also the present-day concern about what political attitude Christians can and even should have in a changing Western world. Thus, in his conclusion, Tuininga shares with the reader his conviction that "Calvin's two kingdoms theology offers us good reason to embrace political liberalism and helpful guidance for what our participation in its practices and institutions might look like." After all that Tuininga has quoted from Calvin this conviction comes as no surprise, but it is also well grounded.

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Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction

Craig G. Bartholomew

Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2017 (363 pages)

As his title indicates, Craig Bartholomew sets out to "introduce readers in some depth to the contours of the Kuyperian tradition and their contemporary relevance." "Kuyperian" refers to the thought and legacy of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), the larger-than-life Dutch Reformed theologian, journalist, and politician. Bartholomew aims to "flesh out the great landmarks of his thought and that of his immediate colleagues" (ix), and he is quite successful in this task. His work is a well-written, wide-ranging, and engaging study that should prove to be a fine introduction to this school of thought for the uninitiated, and will also provide important material for reflection among those already familiar with it.