

**THE THEOLOGY OF
JOHN CALVIN**
by Charles Partee.
Louisville, KY:
Westminster John Knox
Press 2008. 345pp.

Noted Calvin scholar Charles Partee offers a helpful commentary on Calvin's *Institutes*. Hence he does not seek to offer a comprehensive portrait of the Reformer's voluminous thought, yet he frequently cites Calvin's commentaries and other writings as well. Partee follows what he calls a "no school" approach, attempting to "read Calvin as directly as possible" (p. xv). The resulting interpretation certainly makes a fruitful contribution to Calvin scholarship, but it also has inherent limitations.

He exerts considerable effort to clear away the undergrowth of the many interpretations of Calvin that entwine his work in the theological agendas of later times. While this performs a useful service, it actually gets in the way of a "direct read" of this influential Reformer. Moreover, these scholarly debates will often be of more interest to those already well advanced in Calvin studies or theological inquiry in general. For instance, we find a long digression on the debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in the 1930's. While Partee's discussion of Calvin

himself is often useful for beginning students, the many sidebars will likely prove discouraging to them.

Partee dispels the common notion that Calvin is interested in a general philosophical understanding of reality or a thoroughly logical theology. He continually reminds us that the Reformer's thought is primarily pastoral and confessional, rooted in the believer's actual walk with God. It is addressed to practising Christians; it is "more doxological than deductive". Partee shows that Calvin has healthy respect for God's irreducible mystery and salutary humility about our faltering human attempts to bear faithful witness to our saving encounters with Christ.

The book persuasively argues that "the doctrine of union with Christ is close to center stage in Calvin's theology". This illumines the oft-debated structure of the *Institutes*. Partee helpfully suggests that Books I and II, on God the Creator and God the Redeemer, describe how God is *for* us, while Books III and IV, on faithful persons and the church, delineate how God is *with* us. Christ as *the* way of access to God is the red thread running through all the diverse materials in Calvin's major work.

The major limitation of the "direct read" approach followed by Partee is that it reads the *text* without adequate attention to the *context* in

which and to which it was written. The doctrine of predestination offers a telling case in point. Partee helpfully points to the practical, comforting function of this doctrine as an affirmation of God's special providential care and a foundation of the assurance of faith (importantly, Calvin's treatment of this controversial theme comes *after* his discussion of faith). He demonstrates that it is not Calvin's central doctrine but rather another expression of the believer's union with Christ. However, these points acquire much more poignancy if it is made clear that Calvin addressed persecuted Protestants in his native France who wondered if they might lose salvation if they renounced their faith under torture.

These shortcomings become glaring in Partee's rushed treatment of Book IV — the longest section of the *Institutes*. He shows no interest in tracing the polemics and "long historical disquisitions" that make up the bulk of this final book, matters that were of great importance to Calvin. Passing over them so lightly seems inconsistent with the stated intent of a "direct read" of the Reformer's thought not ruled by later historical concerns,

and is at odds with his sensitivity over Calvin's treatment of angels and demons in Book I, and his regret over the way interpreters usually ignore them. Partee does much to help us understand the centrality of the theme of union with Christ in Calvin's work. However, he neglects the fierce denunciation of idolatry that safeguarded Calvin's sense of Christ's sole authority. Without this we cannot properly understand Calvin's thought in its own context.

In his treatment of Book IV Partee opts to be dismissive of Calvin's political thought, considering it unworthy of theological attention. But in the 16th century, reflection on civil authority was a prime topic for debate. Calvin and his contemporaries would never have thought of splitting theology from political thought, for they did not envision the later separation of church and state in the West.

I cannot recommend Partee's work to beginning students of Calvin. For those already engaged in the Reformer's thought, however, Partee is a worthy interlocutor.

— Don H. Compier