

Reviews

Christopher Elwood, *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. (182pp)

John R. Franke, *Barth for Armchair Theologians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. (183pp)

The Armchair series in theology, now numbering seven volumes ranging from Augustine to Wesley, are primarily written for newcomers to various thinkers and moments in Christian history. They are fast paced, humorous, and satisfying introductions and overviews. The two works under review are written by experts in their field, both Elwood and Franke having published on Calvin and Barth respectively in the past. Given the Westminster John Knox Press commissioning of these works, the books are clearly written by thinkers sympathetic to their subjects and yet, without fault, both writers are fair and respectful in their treatments. Added to the lucid and simple writing style (only sixteen endnotes in the work on Calvin!) are humorous illustrations by Ron Hill. What more could students want than simple surveys with pictures!

The volume on Calvin, the first in the series, by Elwood (Associate Professor of Historical Theology, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary), contains five chapters. After a brief introduction to Calvin's life which sets him squarely within renaissance - reformation contexts in France and the continent, Elwood presents an overview of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in ninety pages. This is a magnificently clear articulation of the major concerns of the *Institutes* and provides novices to Calvin with a potted summary of his life's work which is remarkably accurate. Elwood then provides details on the declining years of Calvin's life in Geneva and concludes with an assessment of the impact Calvin has had since his death. Elwood considers everything from the Weber thesis through democratic politics to feminist theology and fundamentalism. At each turn Elwood is sympathetic yet objective in his assessments, endeavours to take the middle path in his evaluation of Calvin's impact, and provides the first-time reader with insights into many of the issues which have tended to divide Calvin scholarship. A brief section on further reading closes the study.

Elwood succeeds in bringing Calvin and his work into focus and defends Calvin from caricatures which would distort either his impact or his personality. For instance we read, 'In 1937, an American named Dale Carnegie wrote a bestseller called *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In 1991, some other Americans named Roger Fisher and William Ury, wrote another bestseller entitled *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. It is a pity that Calvin was unable to dip into these texts, as they might have given him some ideas about how to approach Geneva's new rulers' (pp21-22). Other instances include Elwood's comparison of Calvin's theology of sin to a stanza from Dr Seuss: 'And this mess is so big / And so deep and so tall, / We can not pick it up. / There is no way at all!' (p72). Delightful! The deft way Elwood negotiates his way through post-reformation theology and the disputes over who is or is not a genuine heir of Calvin is another significant feature of the work and will prove especially useful for people new to Calvin studies.

The volume on Karl Barth by Franke (Professor of Theology, Biblical Theological Seminary), is just as informative and useful and yet lacks the humour and winsomeness of Elwood's work. The cartoons by Ron Hill wonderfully illustrate this work as well as Elwood's but the prose is more academic (101 footnotes for instance), and there is much more detail in this work than in the volume on Calvin. Reading Franke's work takes a little more effort and those familiar with Barth and the *Church Dogmatics* will find it more stimulating than the work on Calvin. The trade off is that first-time readers of Barth may find this volume rather difficult in places. Franke provides good summaries of Barth's life and influence and a fifty page summary of the *Church Dogmatics*. Franke is less objective than Elwood and takes a firm stand on many issues which are highly contested in Barth studies. As with the Elwood volume, Franke provides a chapter discussing the impact of Barth's theology and the various ways his work has been read, most notably neo-orthodox and post-modern readings. A section on further reading is also supplied.

These volumes are enjoyable and easy to read and provide first rate introductions and summaries to Calvin and Barth. First year students to theology will greatly appreciate them and those more familiar with the subjects will enjoy a refresher course.

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