

Reviews

CHARLES PARTEE. *THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN*. LOUISVILLE: WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS, 2008. (XVII + 345 PP.) [ISBN: 978-0-664-23119-4]

MYK HABETS

CAREY BAPTIST COLLEGE

The Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) is one of the most influential figures in religious history. His life and theology have been scrutinized by generations and studies on his writings continue to flood the printing presses. And yet despite this, there is still an ill-informed caricature of Calvin by many Christians of an ill-tempered curmudgeon hell-bent on squashing all who dared think differently from him. Partee, Professor of Church History at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, is aware of these misconceptions and has written a book on Calvin's thought which goes some way to dispelling such notions. While Partee concentrates on the thought and theology of Calvin, in the process he makes direct and indirect comments about Calvin the man, the pastor, the husband, the father, and the Christian disciple.

This is a beautifully written book. Partee writes with the hand of a seasoned professional who knows what he is talking about. After lecturing and writing on Calvin for decades, Partee proves to be a sure guide through Calvin's *Institute*, Commentaries, letters, and tracts. Partee's aim in this book is twofold: to survey the full sweep of Calvin's theology, and to collect the benefits that accrue. As an historian Partee stays true to his discipline of historical theology and examines Calvin's thought in context, avoids anachronism, and deals fairly with his sources. The product is a lengthy study of Calvin's theology, especially of the *Institute*, and the wider theological and historical contexts within which such theology may be understood. Only on one occasion does Partee explicitly move from historical theology to contemporary theology; in a section on mysticism and deification (pp. 167–179). Taking up both themes, popular in current studies of Calvin, Partee shows how Calvin can, with some work, be characterised as a mystical theologian. However, when it comes to deification, Partee argues against all attempts to read Eastern Orthodox ideas out of Calvin's use of 'deification'. On p. 176, Partee even cites a Kiwi theologian who supports a reading of Calvin as advocate of a form of *theosis* and graciously disagrees with him. While Partee may have misunderstood said Kiwi, his excurses on mysticism and deification are a welcome and informative sidetrack.

Two strengths of Partee's study deserve specific mention. Partee successfully shows how one of Calvin's central theological ideas is that of union with Christ and yet this does not occupy an integrative motif or formal principle of correlation for Calvin or his supposed theological 'system'. Throughout each section of the *Institute* Partee successfully highlights how the theme of union with Christ is central to an understanding of each part of the whole. This allows Partee to make sense of Calvin's treatment of sanctification before justification, for instance. This is a welcome reading of Calvin and one which, in my opinion, is entirely correct. The second strength is related to the first and it is the place pneumatology plays

in Calvin's—the "theologian of the Spirit"—theology. As a distinctly Trinitarian theologian, Calvin's theology can only be fully understood when the mission and identity of the Holy Spirit is recognised. Through the four books of the *Institute* and in the various other tracts and treatises Calvin wrote, Partee keeps pneumatology in focus and in so-doing shows some of the deeper structures of his theological vision.

On the basis of these two commitments; union with Christ and pneumatology, Partee is able to highlight how Calvin's theology is profound, pastoral, and practical. To illustrate, Partee reminds the reader that Calvin does not call his *Institutes* a *summa theologiae* but a *summa pietatis*—meaning a comprehensive and systematic confession of the love of God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ the Eternal Son, and effected by the work of the Holy Spirit (p. 297). What this means in practice is that Calvin attempts to be faithful to Scripture more than faithful to philosophical logic. This does not mean Calvin's theology is incoherent or contradictory, it is extremely logical. What it does mean is that when a decision is to be made between two ideas, both biblical, which are seemingly hard to reconcile, Calvin will assert both and resist the temptation to delve deeper than faith will allow. This is evident in his affirmation of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of the human person, for instance, or the eternal election of God to life and the 'accident' of reprobation. According to Partee, Calvin's theology "is not a rational synthesis, it is a theological confession of the truth which is revealed in Jesus Christ, informed by Scripture, guided by tradition, certified by experience, and elaborated by reason" (p. 330). Once again Partee's instincts ring true and Calvin's voice comes through clearly and, I think, accurately.

Partee's work is one of the best introductions to and overviews of Calvin's theology to date and will quickly establish itself on the essential reading list of any course on Calvin or Reformed theology around the world for some time to come. Move over Wendel, Partee has arrived! It is also a very enjoyable work with *bon mots* for all. Enjoy.

NANCY LEE, *LYRICS OF LAMENT: FROM TRAGEDY TO TRANSFORMATION*. MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS PRESS, 2010. (XII +196 PP). [ISBN: 978-0-800-66301-8]

MIRIAM BIER

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Nancy Lee's *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* is a timely reminder of the power and promise of lament across time, geography, faith, and culture. From Ancient Mesopotamian city laments, to laments for New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Lee gathers a vast spectrum of lament literature and demonstrates its unique ability to give voice to human pain and suffering in all its specificity and universality.

Chapter one introduces a variety of laments from various times and cultures, all of which have in common the understanding that a particular deity is behind the lamentable events. In this chapter Lee posits the role of women in composing and performing dirges and notes the continuing tradition of women