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Calvin: Geneva and the Reformation: a study of Calvin as social reformer, churchman, pastor and theologian

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Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation

Ronald S. Wallace

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1988

In his terse, splendidly written *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation*, Ronald S. Wallace has given us an eminently fine summary of the full range of Calvin's thought in the context of both his life and that of Reformation Geneva. Too many works on Calvin give only passing reference to the reality of Geneva. As well, they slip over the reformer's life in too superficial a way. Wallace's book is a welcome exception to this. Calvin's theology is thoroughly summarized, with a wealth of quoted material, but it is never divorced from its broader social or personal and biographical contexts. His understanding of Calvin's views on politics, economics and education in Geneva are interwoven into the broader tapestry of Genevan events which shaped these views. Calvin's role as pastor is highlighted, and in this section one encounters his theology of worship, ministry, church polity, mission, martyrdom and pastoral care in all their facets. Extensive use of Calvin's correspondence is employed to portray these concerns. The book concludes with an examination of Calvin as theologian. Once again Wallace places Calvin's ideas into the historical context. The reformer's theology is described in the matrix of theological method, polemical style and personal insights into the man himself.

Wallace has produced a finely crafted and useful summary. He has plumbed the Calvin corpus with rigour and thoroughness. His scholarship is impeccable. Fine and clear writing add to the positive dimensions of the book. Add to this, the intricate intertwining of thought and biography and sociopolitical history and one has a most commendable work. It is a well-organized, usable and instant Calvin resource. See the well-organized index as a fine example of this.

There remain, however, some discordant notes. More attention could have been given to the continuous turbulence in Genevan town life and politics, yet even here, an author was forced to set his own priorities. Most unfortunate, the book is too heavily dominated by apologetic concerns. Only toward the end of the work do we glimpse weaknesses in the man. Prior to that the fine scholarship is marred by rather uncritical hagiography. To be honestly and personally involved with one's subject matter is hardly a negative quality, but it is nonetheless incumbent upon a scholar to delve more critically into a man as complex and sometimes contradictory as Calvin was. In the final analysis, though, this one glaring flaw does not harm irreparably an otherwise fine work of scholarship.

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