

BOOK REVIEW

Bonnie L. Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006. xi + 379 pp. Pbk. \$37. ISBN 978-1-59752-691-3.

Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin is an engaging work that covers quite a bit more ground than its title indicates. Bonnie Pattison spends the entire opening section (the first 141 pages) carefully contextualizing Calvin's position in relation to the topic of poverty. In doing so, she offers a handy historical summary, a *geschichte* of poverty through the life of the church. Her focus is (as it should be given her theme) trained on those thinkers who had some direct influence on Calvin. As Calvin was such a wide reader himself, this still leaves us with a good depiction of the theological significance of poverty through the patristic, Medieval, and early Reformation periods of the *western* church. Reading western theological history through the lens of a discussion on wealth and poverty makes one aware of just how much this issue was integral to what transpired—from the development of new orders within the Medieval church, to the burgeoning heretical sects of the late Middle Ages, and as a root catalyst of the Reformation itself. It should be noted that Pattison's own perspective is decidedly Protestant. I doubt very much that a Catholic reader (or a radical Reformation reader) would find herself agreeing with many of the depictions made and conclusions drawn. For this reason, I hesitate to recommend this work as a text for undergraduate level studies, but coupled with voices from other perspectives, this work could contribute much to a graduate-level seminar discussion.

This seems the most appropriate use for this work, because Pattison presents Calvin's position for us in the best possible light. She offers arguments for Calvin that he does not quite make himself, draws conclusions from his allusions and suggestions, and never once stops to assess his position critically. Her work seems to me a fair representation of how Calvin has been received by the most well-meaning of his followers. The dangers of his position on this issue are there on the page for one to see, but Pattison does not highlight them for us. She allows Calvin to say that people find themselves in poverty because God places them there, either for punitive reasons, or for their own spiritual edification, or simply so they may serve as recipients of alms from the wealthy who need someone to give to for their own spiritual benefit. She does not ask, however, if such a position might lead some to a passive acceptance of poverty as the justice of God meted out on the "undeserving" poor. Pattison points out that for Calvin self-denial and acceptance of a state of poverty are "essential to discipleship" but she does not ask why Calvin did not see fulfilling the commands of Matt. 25:31-46 (feeding the

hungry, clothing the denuded, etc.) as likewise essential (195). Of course, for the wealthy person, such self-denial does not mean dispossessing oneself of riches; for Calvin it only means giving up affection for the wealth one is free to retain.

Herein lies the only major problem I had with Pattison's monograph. In the first section, she details how as the life of the church progressed, poverty came to be spiritualized, so that biblical instructions that seem clearly aimed at material goods and their proper use were domesticated so as not to prevent the accumulation of wealth (especially by the Medieval clergy). These hermeneutical moves were made by drawing a sharp distinction between the spiritual and the material; Scripture came to be viewed as speaking only to spiritual matters, not material matters. This spiritualization was used to justify the accumulation of vast wealth by the church (and even some of the monastic orders). Attempts at reform, such as that of Francis of Assisi, were made, but were short lived and quickly put down by the church's hierarchy, again using the same spiritualized logic. Pattison underscores these errors clearly, but when Calvin makes the same moves in her second section, she has no critique. She shows Calvin giving a spiritualized reading of the Beatitudes (clearly favoring the Matthean account over the Lucan one), the judgment scene of Matt. 25, and the commands of Moses in Deut. 15. The judgment scene in Matt. 25:31-46 is particularly robbed of the message Jesus sought to convey. Calvin wrongly equates "the sheep with those who are poor, oppressed, and afflicted," despite the fact that the whole point of the pericope is that the sheep are those who have given solicitude to those in need (310). Calvin stresses in his interpretation of this passage that salvation does not come by works, that worshipping God is much more important than doing works of mercy, and that what Jesus offers us here are recommendations—that other charitable works, such as advising "simple-minded men," are quite as legitimate as those that Jesus suggests (312). At no point does Pattison pause to tell us that she finds this reading deficient, even though it clearly stands Jesus' point on its head.

There is also a brief section near the end where Pattison brings up the issue of begging. Begging was outlawed in Geneva; Calvin defends this based on an argument from nature (331) and because he sees Deut. 15:11 ("there will be no beggars in the land") not as an ideal for the Israelites to work toward, but as a Divine, scriptural prohibition against begging (329). Pattison presents Calvin's biased, stereotyped view of beggars as lazy thieves, but again this is presented without critique. A fuller account of beggars in the life of the church is available: Kelly S. Johnson, *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2007).

This work is quite helpful in that it presents the classic Reformed/Calvinist position on poverty; its history in the life of the church (told from said perspective) and what you may reasonably expect a person from that family of traditions to think about poverty and poor people specifically. This logic should be engaged critically and Pattison has given us a tome worthy of such engagement.

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