

BOOK REVIEW

of

John Calvin,

The Bondage and Liberation of the Will,

Baker Books, 1996.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

It is perhaps amazing, but while this book has been available in Latin since its publication by Calvin in 1543, and was translated into French in 1560, it was not available in any other language until the publication of the book under review, fortunately in English. I think we owe a great deal to scholars willing to labor on books such as this one, knowing that the rewards in this life for such a project are somewhat limited. It was translated from the Latin by G.I. Davies. The editing and the copious and useful notes were done by A.N.S. Lane. The book is beautifully typeset and has running summary notes along the margins, as well as having detailed footnotes. It includes a subject index, a Scripture index, and a patristic and classical index. This is a scholarly work of the first rank. The publisher and all involved are to be commended. Luther's *Bondage of the Will* is well-known and is probably his finest theological work (so thought Luther himself, and also B.B. Warfield), but this one by Calvin has remained until recently somewhat obscure. The bondage of the will by sin, and the liberation of it by Christ, is central to the Christian Gospel, but is a difficult subject. Probably the three best works on the subject are those by Luther, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards, each one making a significant contribution. Luther's work, published in 1525, was in response to a book by Erasmus on the subject of free will, and concentrates on Biblical exposition. Edwards' work, published in 1754 (Paul Ramsey, Princeton University, and editor of the Yale University Press issue of Edwards' book on free will, refers to Edwards as "the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene," and refers specifically to his work on free will as "Edwards' greatest literary achievement"), while including many Biblical citations, is primarily a systematic philosophical development. Calvin's work on the subject (the book under review) was in response to a book by Albert Pighius on the subject of free will and predestination. While it does include Biblical exposition, perhaps not to the extent that Luther's work does, it does, unlike Luther, include a significant amount of material on the early Church Fathers and Councils in support of Reformation theologians on the doctrine of the bondage and liberation of the will (following the pattern set by Pighius). It is not an easy read, as you may suspect, but the quality of this publication helps considerably, and it is difficult to imagine a topic of more fundamental significance to the Gospel.

Pighius' book is divided into ten "books," the first six of which are on freedom of the will, and Calvin responds to those six "books" in the book under review (Calvin responded to the last four "books" on predestination with his later work *Eternal Predestination of God*, published in 1552). The general format that Calvin chose was to respond to Pighius' ideas, and criticisms, book by book, elaborating with detail. Since Pighius presents Scripture and quotations from Church Fathers in his supposed support, Calvin shows where Pighius goes wrong and then reinforces his own views with great skill.

The true side of this controversy, whether presented by Calvin, Luther, or Edwards, seems simple enough to state. It becomes difficult only when contemplating the implications. The true doctrine is that we play no part in our salvation: it is by grace and grace alone. We have no spiritual life within us until God calls us to faith in Jesus Christ. Expanded upon, Calvin and others will get into original sin, the bondage of the will, the sovereignty of God, predestination, and that grace is prevenient, efficacious, and continuous. Calvin presents strong support for his position first and foremost from the Scriptures, but also from Church Fathers and Church Councils. Examples from the Scriptures: "And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves" (Eph. 2:8), "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). Calvin clearly shows that what he teaches is in close agreement with Augustine, referring to many of his writings. He also refers to several other Church Fathers. The Council of Orange (529 A.D.) issued the following: "If anyone says that mercy is bestowed on us because apart from the grace of God we will, toil, desire, try, ask, seek, or knock, and does not acknowledge that it is from God through the Spirit that we are enabled to believe, will, ask, and do all these things as we should, he resists the apostle when he says: What do you have that you have not received?" This issue is debated today, as it was during the Reformation, and in the early Church. It is also the case that it is at the very heart of the Gospel.