

BOOK REVIEW

of

W. Gary Crampton,

What Calvin Says: An Introduction to the Theology of John Calvin, second edition,
The Trinity Foundation, 2002.

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

Whether you are a Christian or not, whether you are a Calvinist or not, it seems to be well accepted that John Calvin is one of the most influential thinkers and writers in history. Some think he is the leading theologian of the Protestant Reformation, and others, such as Will Durant, a writer that I otherwise admire, thinks he has “darkened the human soul”. One difficulty with Calvin, perhaps a difficulty, is that he has written a great deal. Without wanting to read all of his commentaries, sermons, letters, etc., how is one to best obtain an overview of Calvin’s ideas? One good way, I recommend, is to read this book by W. Gary Crampton.

W. Gary Crampton, ordained in the PCA, holds two doctorates. One of those doctorates is in theology from Whitefield Theological Seminary, and the other one is in philosophy from the Central School of Religion in Surrey, England. In addition to *What Calvin Says*, Crampton’s other writings include *By Scripture Alone*, *The Scripturalism of Gordon H. Clark*, and *A Study Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*.

The book under review is about 150 pages long, and is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1 is titled *The Man, the Churchman, and the Statesman*, and gives a brief biographical sketch of Calvin. Following chapters are: *Calvin on Knowledge*, *Calvin on Scripture*, *Calvin on God*, *Calvin on Man*, *Calvin on the Covenant*, *Calvin on Christ*, *Calvin on Salvation*, *Calvin on the Church*, and *Calvin on the Last Things*. It is perhaps interesting to note that the above chapter titles give no hint of the five points of Calvinism, which were written by others at a later time to refute, point by point, the five points of Arminianism. “In 1610, a year after Arminius died, his followers wrote five points of doctrine and asked the government of Holland to amend the *Belgic Confession of Faith* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*”. “From November 1618 to May 1619 a meeting of many Protestant churches of Europe was held . . . to examine the teachings of Arminius”. “This Synod of Dort rejected the teachings of Arminius as unbiblical and wrote five chapters against them; these chapters became known as the five points of Calvinism.” However, since the five points of Calvinism were derived from Calvin’s theology and are forever linked with the name of Calvin, the book includes a 14-page appendix on the five points of Calvinism with supporting Scripture for each point. So, what does Calvin say?

It is interesting to note that Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a discussion on knowledge of God and knowledge of self, and how they are interrelated. Crampton also begins his formal presentation of Calvin’s teachings (Chapter 2) with what Calvin has to say about knowledge. It is helpful to remember that Calvin presents a systematic theology, and apparently his view of knowledge is fundamental. “In a spectacular and thoroughly Biblical reversal of traditional philosophy and theology, Calvin taught that God – not one’s self or the world – is the object best known to man. Calvin taught that the Spirit of God has implanted an innate awareness of God in all men”.

In Chapter 5, *Calvin on Man*, Crampton writes “The Reformed view of man as God’s image is that the image of God has two aspects: epistemological and ethical. Although Calvin does not use these exact terms, this is clearly his view as well (*Institutes* I:15:3). The former has to do with man as a rational, spiritual, immortal being. This part of the image was defaced by the fall, but not altogether eradicated.” He continues, “The ethical image, which is more restricted in nature, consists of true (ethical) knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (*Colossians* 3:10; *Ephesians* 4:24). This part of the image was erased at the fall, to the point where fallen man can think and do nothing that pleases God. Man is now totally depraved. The ethical image can only be renewed in man by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (*Institutes* I:15:4).”

In Chapter 7, *Calvin on Christ*, Crampton writes “As noted above, there is a sense in which we can say that Calvin held that the atonement was the purpose of the Incarnation. Said the Reformer, ‘the only end which the Scripture uniformly assigns for the Son of God voluntarily assuming our nature, and even receiving it as a command from the Father, is, that He might propitiate the Father to us by becoming a victim’ (*Institutes* II:12:4). This, of course, is a part of the Son’s priestly ministry.”

In Chapter 10, *Calvin on the Last Things*, Crampton writes that “Calvin’s view of eschatology (both personal and general) is inextricably related to his concept of history. His is a dynamic view of history in which the sovereign, predestinating God of Scripture is actively involved, not only in creating all things, but also in providentially bringing all of history to its appointed destiny”.